

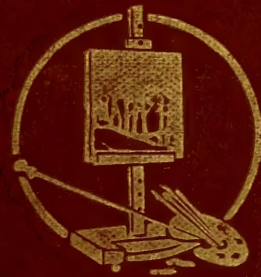
# AMERICAN PAINTING AND ITS TRADITION

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AMERICAN PAINTING  
AND ITS TRADITION



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# AMERICAN PAINTING

## AND ITS TRADITION

AS REPRESENTED BY INNESS, WYANT, MARTIN, HOMER,  
LA FARGE, WHISTLER, CHASE, ALEXANDER,  
SARGENT

BY

JOHN C. VAN DYKE

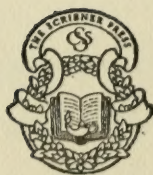
Author of "Art for Art's Sake," "The Meaning of Pictures,"  
"What is Art?" etc.

With Twenty-four Illustrations

NEW YORK  
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## PREFACE

THE painters about whom these chapters are written helped to make up the period in American painting dating, generally, from about 1878 to, say, 1915. That period has practically closed in the sense that a newer generation with different aims and aspirations has come forward, and the men who broke ground years ago in the Society of American Artists have turned their furrow and had their day. Indeed, those I have chosen to write about herein, with the exception of Sargent, have passed on and passed out. Not only their period but their work has ended. We are now beginning to see them in something like historic perspective. Perhaps, then, the time is opportune for speaking of them as a group and of their influence upon American art.

Not all of the one-time "new movement" originated and died with these nine men. Dozens of painters became identified with American art just after the Centennial, and many of those who came back from Munich and Paris in the late seventies and the early eighties are still living and producing. But while the nine were by no means the whole count they were certainly representative of the movement, and their works speak for almost every phase of it. The value of the movement to American art can be rightly enough judged from them.

During their lives these nine did not lack for praise—some of it wise and some of it otherwise. They were much exploited in print. I myself joined in the chorus. I had more or less acquaintance with all of them, lived through the period with them, and from 1880 on wrote much about them. My opportunities for seeing and hearing were abundant, and perhaps such value as this book may possess comes from my having been a looker-on in Vienna during those years. To personal impressions I am now adding certain conclusions as to

what the men on my list, taken as a body, have established. They wrought during a period of great material development—wrought in a common spirit, making an epoch in art history and leaving a tradition. The pathfinders in any period deserve well of their countrymen. And their trail is worth following, for eventually it may become a broad national highway.

J. C. V. D.

Rutgers College,  
1919.



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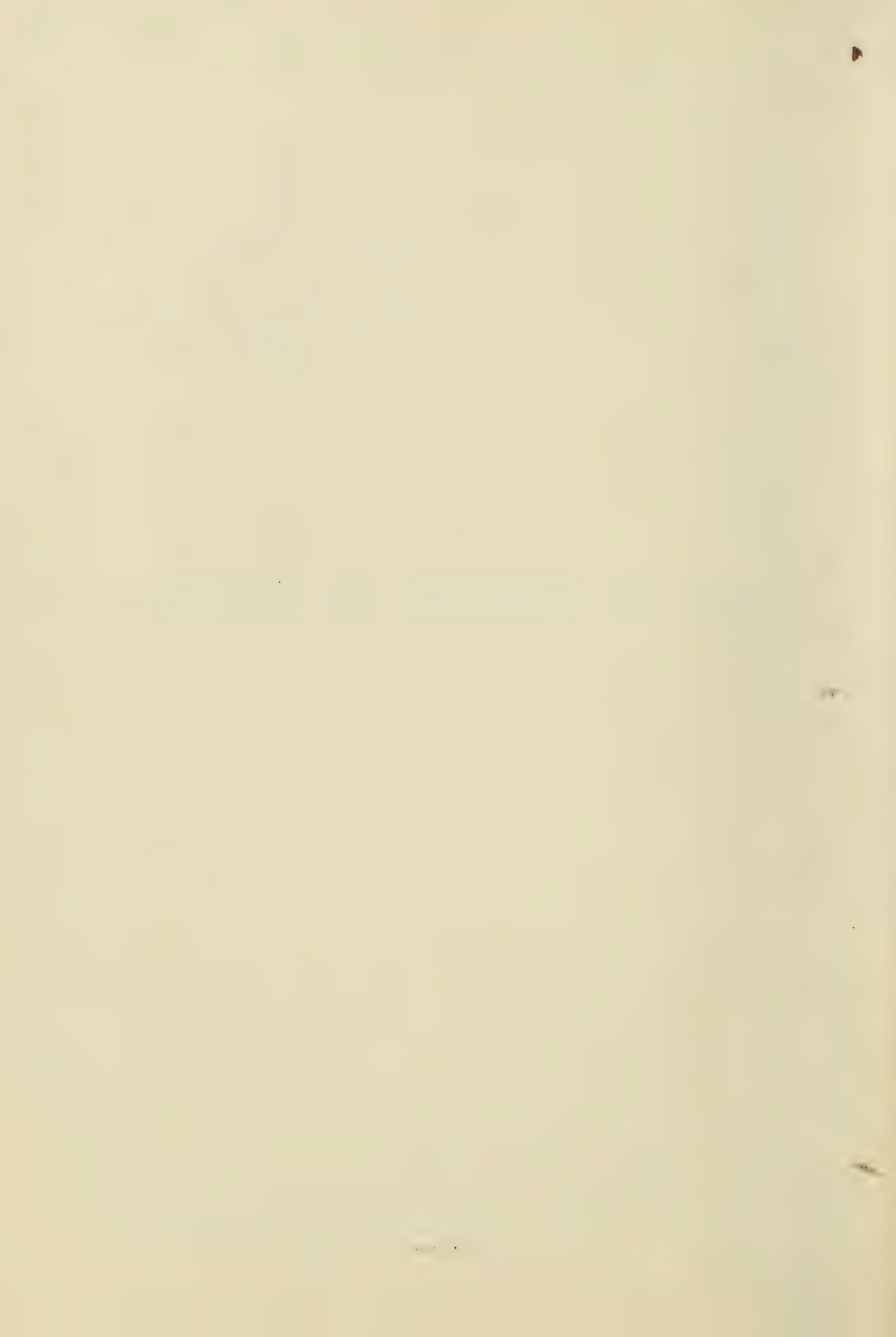
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# **I**

## **THE ART TRADITION IN AMERICA**





# I

## THE ART TRADITION IN AMERICA

**DURING** the Revolutionary Period, and immediately thereafter, art in America was something of sporadic growth, something not quite indigenous but rather transplanted from England. Painting was little more than portraiture, and the work was done after the English formula. America had no formula of its own. There was no native school of art, no tradition of the craft, no body of art knowledge handed down from one generation to another. West and Copley started out practically without predecessors. They were the beginners.

With Cole, Durand, and, later on, Kensett, that is about 1825, another kind of painting sprang up on American soil. It was the painting of landscape—landscape of the Hudson River variety—and, whatever its technical shortcomings, at least it had the merit of being original. Apparently nothing of artistic faith or of accumulated knowledge or art usage was handed down to the Hudson River men by the portrait-painters who had preceded them. The leaders worked from nature with little or no instruction. They were self-taught, and if any inkling of how

work was carried on in the painting-rooms of Copley, Stuart, or Vanderlyn was given them, they turned a deaf ear to it or found it inapplicable to their landscape-work. If they knew of a tradition they ignored it.

This matter of tradition—the accumulated point of view and teaching of the craft—is of some importance in our inquiry. It has gone to the making of all the great art of the past. There were several hundred years of sculptors in Greece, with a continuous story, before Scopas and Praxiteles brought their art to final maturity; for centuries painters, with their craftsman-making guilds, had preceded Raphael, Leonardo, and Titian; countless “primitives” and “early men” went to the shades unsung before Velasquez, Rubens, Rembrandt, Holbein came to power. In America the Copley-Stuart contingent caught at, and in large measure grasped, the foreign teaching handed down by Reynolds and his school. Perhaps that accounts in some measure for their success. A generation later Cole and Durand started out to paint landscape without any teaching whatever. Does that account in any degree for their failure? They failed to produce any fine quality of art, but they had pupils and followers in whom the Hudson River school finally culminated. It became a school because Cole and Durand established with themselves a teaching, such as it was, and handed down to their pupils a point of view



and a body of tradition. Perhaps again that explains, to some extent, the varied successes of such followers of the school as Inness, Wyant, Martin, Swain Gifford, Whittredge, McEntee.

But not entirely. Some of these last-named were influenced by European art, outgrew the teaching of their forerunners, and in middle life rather forsook their early love and faith. Yet it would be idle to contend that they had not received an inclination, even an inspiration, from contact with the older men. Short-lived though it was, and shallow as were its teachings, the Hudson River school, nevertheless, had weight with its followers. Even error is often helpful in establishing truth, and a feeble precedent is perhaps better than none at all. Some of the pupils—F. E. Church and Sandford Gifford, for examples—never outgrew their basic teaching. To the end they carried on the Cole-Durand tradition, improving and bettering it. They bettered it because they could add to their own view-point the observation and teaching of their masters. Three generations at least are supposed to be necessary to the making of the thorough gentleman. Is it possible to make the thorough artist in one?

But the Hudson River school was too frail inherently to carry great weight. Men like Inness, Wyant, and Martin soon began to see its weaknesses. Even before they went to Europe they had doubted and after their return to America they were openly heretical. They held allegiance

only in the matter of the Catskill-Adirondack subject, and even that became modified to a virtual disappearance toward the end of their careers. Both aim and method changed with them. They saw deeper and painted freer, until finally they were wholly out of sympathy not only with the thin technique of the school but with its panoramic conception of nature.

So it was that in 1876 when the United States held its first national art exhibition—the Centennial, at Philadelphia—the painting of the country was in something of an anomalous condition. The Hudson River school was practically at the end of its rope. The older portrait-painters had been succeeded by Harding, Alexander, Neagle, Elliott, Inman, Page, Healy—each of them more or less going his own way. The German Leutze had been here and had blazed a brimstone trail of Düsseldorf method, along which some painters followed. Hicks and Hunt at Boston had introduced the French art of Couture and Millet, and they also had a following. Quite apart from all of them stood some independent personalities like La Farge and Winslow Homer, who seemed to say, “a plague on all your houses.” And they, too, went their own ways. There was no school unity.

No wonder then with these conflicting individualities, and with all traditions obsolete or unknown, there was no such thing as an American school of painting at the Centennial Exhibition.

The visitor in Memorial Hall wandered hither and yon among the pictures and vainly strove to grasp a consensus of art opinion or even an art tendency. The exhibition was more or less of a hodgepodge. As a result both painter and public went away in a somewhat bemuddled condition. Perhaps the only thing about the exhibition that impressed one strongly was the general incompetence and inconsequence of it.

Just at this time there entered upon the scene another generation, a younger group of American painters. Many of them had seen the exhibition at the Centennial and had, perhaps, been unwarrantably influenced by it. They brought away from it a longing to paint; but they realized that such art as that at Philadelphia was not what they wished to produce, and if American teaching was responsible for it, so much the worse for the teaching. They would have none of it. Once more there was a sharp break with everything that might resemble a school view or a school method. The younger group left the country and sought instruction in European studios believing that nothing of good could come out of the Nazareth of America.

Some of this later generation had gone abroad for study just before 1876. Shirlaw, Chase, and Duveneck were at Munich; Maynard, Minor, and Millet at Antwerp; Blashfield, Bridgman, Beckwith, Thayer, Alden Weir, Low, Wyatt Eaton at Paris. After 1876 the exodus was greater and



Paris was the goal. A few years later some of these students were homeward bound, having finished a more or less advanced course of instruction under competent masters. They immediately set up studios in New York, and, with the enthusiasm and assurance of youth, began to impart information to the effect that the only painting of importance was that of Europe. As for the native American art, it was not worth reckoning with. The Academy of Design was merely the abiding-place of the ossified, and, of course, it would be surrendered on the demand of the younger men. But the Academy, after a battle of words, declined to give up the fort, and a little later declined even to hang some of the pictures of the gifted. This was regarded as unspeakably outrageous, and swift action followed. In 1877 there was a call for the establishment of a new art body, and out of it came the Society of American Artists, with twenty-two initial members.

The younger men had not invited the academicians as a body to join them, but they had recognized the talent of certain men, who, though members of the Academy, were not in full sympathy with it. In other words, the aloof element of the Academy was elected to membership in the Society. These men—La Farge, Inness, Martin, Moran, Tiffany, Colman, Swain Gifford—joined the new without abandoning the old, and the Society quickly got under way, with its

declaration of independence nailed to the mast-head. In ten years the Society had grown in membership to over a hundred, had held yearly exhibitions from 1878 on, and had achieved a substantial success—a success of technique, if nothing more.

It is worth noting just here that this departure was a third violent break in the American art tradition. The young men in the Society practically proclaimed that they would start all over again and build a more worthy mansion than their predecessors. Had they not gone to Europe and received the best of technical training? Did they not know how to draw and paint? For the first time in its history America might congratulate itself upon possessing a body of painters that understood the technique of their craft. American art would now begin.

Lest progressive craftsmanship should die out new students continued to go abroad, and the Art Students League was started for those stopping at home. This new institution was not bound by any conventionalities; its existence was a protest against them. It had no century-old precedents to live up to; it was free to stickle for good workmanship alone. It was the training-school for no peculiar kind of art; it stood ready and eager to adopt any new method or medium or material that was offered. It was progressive to the last degree—progressive to the extent of burning every bridge behind it and starting out

*de novo* to produce technicians (and consequent art) worthy of the name.

Well, the men, and the institutions, and the movement have been under way for forty years. Much paint has been spread on canvas in that time and hundreds of hands have been busy producing pictures. The "young men" have become old men and many of them have dropped out. The movement itself no longer moves, though some of its best men are still painting. But what is the net result of these forty years? Have the European-trained, after all, succeeded in producing in their one generation, *sans* tradition, an American art? No one will question for a moment that they have produced many exceptionally good works, even masterpieces; that they are a competent, even learned, body of artists; but has what they have said proclaimed American ideals and reflected American life, or has it repeated the conventions and *atelier* methods of Europe? Has not the manner of saying with them been more in evidence than the thing said? Is their foreign-based art entirely satisfactory or representative of America?

From a Whistlerian point of view this matter of tradition is, of course, great nonsense. Art just "happens" in *Ten O'Clock*, and the artist is that one in the multitude whom the gods see fit to strike with divine fire. He is called to service by inspiration as were the prophets of old. All of which no doubt explains the anointing of



Whistler but does not account for the high-priesthood of Velasquez, of Rembrandt, of Raphael, or of Rubens. To say that three centuries of guild-teaching in the best way to grind color, or lay a gesso ground, or draw a figure, or fill a given space, is not better than the intuition of any one man of a period is equivalent to saying that the accumulated knowledge of the world is worthless, and each new generation should discard it and begin all over again. That is substantially what Mr. Whistler advocated. And, further, that the artist should stand aloof and create independently of time, place, or people.

But out of nothing nothing comes, and psychology assures us that there is no such thing as originality save by a combination of things already known. The old is added to and makes the new. The old is the tradition of the craft; the new is the revised point of view and method plus the old. It was so with Whistler notwithstanding his pretty argument around the clock. He was beholden to Gleyre, Ingres, Boucher, Velasquez, Courbet, Albert Moore, Hokusai, and helped himself to them when, where, and how he could. He would have been the last one to deny it. Had there been more continuity and stability in his training, had he followed the teaching of the craft more intently, he would not have been worried all his life as to whether his people stood well upon their feet, and he might have pro-

duced art with the calmness and poise of his great Velasquez. His misfortune was that he had no thorough schooling, inherited no body of taste, and practically stood alone in art. That he succeeded was owing to exceptional genius. That he was never in the class with Velasquez or Titian or Rembrandt was perhaps due to the fact that they had the training and the tradition and he had not.

The Whistler type is not infrequently met in American life—the type that seeks to scale Olympus without the preliminary of antecedent preparation. In art he usually has half a dozen strings to his bow, and paints, lectures, writes, speaks, carries on a business in Wall Street or elsewhere. He is glib in many things, has great facility, is astonishingly clever; but somehow he never gets beyond the superficial. He has not depth or poise or great seriousness. There is no hard training or long tradition or intellectual heritage behind him. He is not to the manner born.

Every writer in America knows that present-day American literature, with some precious exceptions, does not reach up to contemporary English literature; that poetry or romance or criticism with us has not the form, the substance, or the technical accomplishment of the same work in France. Every architect in America must realize that with all the get-learned-quick of his foreign study, with all his appropriations

from the Gothic or the Renaissance or the Georgian, with all his cleverness in solving business needs and doing building stunts under peculiar circumstances, there is something lacking in his productions; that they are not so monumental as he could wish for; that they are not firm set in the ground and do not belong to the soil and remain a part of the land and the people in the sense of contemporary French or even English architecture. Every musician with us must have a similar feeling about our music. As with architecture and painting, there have been some remarkable compositions put forth by our composers. Europe compliments us by playing them and nods approval at the endeavor, but again they do not reach up to corresponding work in Paris or Berlin or Munich. Why not? Have we not as good brains and fiddles in New York as in Vienna? What is it we lack?

Surely we are not wanting in energy, in resource, in materials. Is it perhaps the restraint of these that we need? Time and patience are very necessary factors in all of the arts. Attitude of mind, a sense of proportion—a style, in short—cannot be attained in a few years of schooling. To the training of a lifetime must be added a something that has been more or less inherited. That something handed down from father to son, from master to pupil, from generation to generation, is what I have called tradition. It



is not technique alone, but a mental outlook, added to the body of belief and experience of those who have gone before. The skilled hand of a Kreisler, a Sargent, a MacMonnies is perhaps possible of attainment in a decade, but the mental attitude—its poise and its restraint—is that something which is inherited as taste, and many decades may go to its formation. In this latter respect, perhaps, Kreisler has had the advantage of both Sargent and MacMonnies.

Coming back, therefore, to the men of the Society of American Artists, (we cannot say that they failed in skill or were wanting in endeavor, or had no intelligence. They had all of these, but, unfortunately, they were not of artistic descent, and inherited no patrimony of style.) Instead they tried to adopt in a few years the long story of French style, and attained only that part of it relating to technique. They were of the third generation in American art, but each one of these generations had denied and forsworn its predecessor, had flung its mess of pottage, such as it was, out of the window, and had left the ancestral roof never to return. The third generation then had nothing by descent, not even a pictorial or a plastic mind that could see the world in images. It went forth empty-handed into the highways and byways of Europe, became proficient in craftsmanship, and relied upon that for success.

This is not merely figure of speech, but state-



ment of fact. None of the American painters spoken of in these pages, with the exception of La Farge, came from what might be called an artistic family, or had æsthetic antecedents. They were boys on a farm or grew up in the atmosphere of trade or profession, and came to art at twenty or thereabouts. They then learned the technique of painting quickly, and with much facility, but their mental attitude toward art was untrained and remained undetermined. Long after they knew *how* to paint they knew not *what* to paint or how to think. Their point of view was superficial or commonplace, or otherwise negligible. I have excepted La Farge, for, as we shall see hereafter, he did have an æsthetic legend behind him. Is that why he is now placed as the one Olympian of the period? I would also partly except Inness, Wyant, and Martin, who did know and follow at one time the rather feeble Hudson River school tradition. I ask again is that why they remain, even to this day, the best of our rather long line of landscape-painters?

Is tradition then synonymous with the academic? Not entirely; though the academies are usually the custodians and conservers of it. Unfortunately, their practice tends to perpetuate a manner that soon becomes a mannerism, and finally the mannerism usurps the place of style. The academic in France or Germany or Italy has of recent years become a term of reproach.

All the rebels in art have been opposed to it. When they rebelled, their rebellion was called by them, or their biographers, "the break with tradition." Rather was it a break with an indurated method or the tyranny of a hanging committee. For tradition has to do more with the spirit and style of art, while the academic is recognized in a method or a formula which, endlessly repeated, finally becomes trite and even banal.

The art of old Japan ran on for centuries and was excellent art notwithstanding it was academic and based in tradition. It did not run into formalism and never became trite until recent years. Its ruin lies straight ahead of it if it shall abandon its traditions and continue to coquette with Occidental art. But the bulk of painting by the young men of the Society of American Artists became commonplace within a dozen years after their return because they had learned abroad only a manner and reproduced it here in America with the persistence of a mannerism. They never knew the academic in its larger significance; they never felt the spirit and style of the traditional.

That is not to proclaim their work worthless or their movement inconsequent. On the contrary, almost everything that one generation in art could do was done. And well done. They established a foundation in sound technique. It remains to be seen if those who come after will

build upon it or cast it down. Moreover, as an expression of the individual quite apart from the time, place, or people, as a representation of cosmopolitan belief about art, it must be accorded a very high place. Whistler and Sargent happen just now to be the most talked about exponents of the cosmopolitan, but dozens of painters here in America since 1876 belong in the same class and have the same belief. It is all along of a new departure in art, and how it shall work out no one can say, but that it does not entirely satisfy contemporary needs is already manifest. In spite of present practice, and quite apart from *Ten O'Clock* and other painter extravagances, (art is still believed to be in some way an expression of a time, a place, and a people.) The world has not yet grown so small that it does not continue to exhibit race characteristics in its art manifestations. That the all-the-world-as-one idea may be farther-reaching, more universal in its scope, and therefore loftier in its art expression than any national or race expression is very possible; nay, probable. Still, even then, with cosmopolitanism in the saddle, there will be the need and the use of tradition—the consensus of opinion and body of belief as to what constitutes style in art.





II  
GEORGE INNESS  
1825-1894





## II

### GEORGE INNESS

1825-1894

A PLAIN man of the business world, knowing nothing of the peculiar manifestations of the artistic mind, would be very apt to wonder over the mental make-up of a George Inness. An artist's way of looking at things is never quite sensible to the man in the street. It is too temperamental, too impulsive; and Inness was supertemperamental even for an artist. When he expressed himself in paint he was very sane; but when he argued, his auditors thought him erratic. And not without reason. He was easily stirred by controversy, and in the heat of discussion he often discoursed like a mad rhapsodist. His thin hands and cheeks, his black eyes, ragged beard, and long dark hair, the dramatic action of his slight figure as he walked and talked, seemed to complete the picture of the perfervid visionary.

He was always somewhat hectic. As a boy he was delicate, suffered from epilepsy, and was mentally overwrought. His physician had nothing to recommend but fresh air. As a man, one

of his hearers over the dinner-table, after listening to his exposition of the feminine element in landscape, or some allied theme, said: "Mr. Inness, what you need is fresh air." Inness used to tell this story about himself with a little smile, as though conscious of having appeared extravagant. As for fresh air in the sense of out-of-doors, he knew more about it than all his business acquaintances put together; but in the sense of its clearing the vision so that he could see things in a matter-of-fact light, it was wholly unavailing. He was born with the nervous organization of the enthusiast. That is not the best temperament imaginable for a practical business man.

And yet Inness certainly thought that his views about life, faith, government, and ethics were sound and applicable to all humanity. Art was only a part of the universal plan. In his theory of the unities everything in the scheme entire dropped into its appointed place. He could show this, to his own satisfaction at least, by the symbolism of numbers, just as he could prove immortality by the argument for continuity. All his life he was devoted to mystical speculations. He had his faith in divination, astrology, spiritualism, Swedenborgianism. And he was greatly stirred by social questions. During the Rebellion he volunteered to fight for the freedom of the slave but was rejected as physically unfit; and later he became interested in labor problems, believed in Henry George and the Single Tax,

and had views about a socialistic republic. He never changed. In his seventieth year he was still discoursing on Swedenborg, on love, on truth, on the unities, with unabated enthusiasm. To expect such a man to be "practical" would be little less than an absurdity, and to expect a practical man to understand him would be almost as futile.

But the fever of intensity that burned in Inness and his visionary way of looking at things were the very features that made possible his greatness as an artist. There is something in the abnormal view—one hardly knows what—that makes for art. Certainly the "practical" work of the camera gives only a statement of fact where the less accurate drawing of a Millet gives something that we call "artistic." The lens of the camera records mechanically and coldly, which may account for the prosaic quality of photography; but the retina of the artist's eye records an impression enhanced by the imagination, which may account for the poetry of art. Whichever way we put it, it is the human element that makes the art. The painter does not record the facts like a machine; he gives his impression of the facts. Inness, with his exalted way of seeing, was full of impressions and was always insisting upon their vital importance.

"The true purpose of the painter," Mr. Sheldon reports him as saying, "is simply to reproduce in other minds the impression which a scene has



made upon him. A work of art is not to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion. Its real greatness consists in the quality and force of this emotion."

And he practised this preaching. Such nervous manifestations as enthusiasm, emotion, and imagination working together and producing an impression were the means wherewith he constructed pictures in his mind. They made up his point of view, and without them we should perhaps have heard little of George Inness as a painter.

It was no mean or stinted equipment. In fact, Inness had too many impressions, had too much imagination. His diversity of view opposed singleness of aim. While he was trying to record one impression upon the canvas, half a dozen others would rush in. Cleveland Cox, who knew him well, said that he changed his mood and point of view with the weather, and if he started a canvas with a storm piece in the morning, it was likely to end in the evening with a glorious sunset, if the weather corresponded. He was never satisfied with his work; he was always altering it and amending it, painting pictures one on top of another, until a single canvas sometimes held a dozen superimposed landscapes.

The late William H. Fuller used to tell the story of buying a landscape in Inness's studio one afternoon and going to get the picture the next day, only to find an entirely different

picture on the canvas. To his protests Inness replied:

"It is a good deal better picture than the other."

"Yes, but I liked the other better."

"Well, you needn't take it—needn't pay for it."

"It isn't a question of losing money. I have lost my picture. It is buried under that new one."

Even when not bothered by many impressions, Inness had great difficulty in contenting himself with his work. It was never quite right. There was a certain fine feeling or sentiment that he had about nature and he wished to express it in his picture; but he found when the sentiment was strong, the picture looked weak in the drawing, had little solidity or substance; and when the solidity was put in with exact lines and precise textures, then the sentiment fared badly. He knew very well where the trouble lay.

"Details in the picture must be elaborated only enough fully to reproduce the impression. When more is done the impression is weakened and lost, and we see simply an array of external things which may be very cleverly painted and may look very real, but which do not make an artistic painting. The effort and the difficulty of an artist is to combine the two; namely, to make the thought clear and to preserve the unity of impression. Meissonier always makes his thought clear; he is most painstaking with de-

tails, but he sometimes loses in sentiment. Corot, on the contrary, is to some minds lacking in objective force. He tried for years to get more objective force, but he found that what he gained in that respect he lost in sentiment."

This is Inness's own statement of the case and it enables us to understand why many of his later canvases were vague, indefinite, often vapory. He was seeking to give a sentiment or feeling rather than topographical facts. When the facts looked too weak, he tried to strengthen them here and there by bringing out notes and tones a little sharper with the result of making them look hard or too protruding. After several passings back and forth from strength to weakness, from sentiment to fact, the canvas began to show a kneaded and thumbled appearance. Its freshness was gone and its surface looked tortured and "bready." He was hardly ever free from this attempt to balance between two stools. It is a plague that bothers all painters, and no doubt many of them would agree with Inness in saying:

"If a painter could unite Meissonier's careful reproduction of details with Corot's inspirational power, he would be the very god of art."

But Inness was much nearer to Corot than to Meissonier. He loved sentiment more than clever technique, and perhaps as a result left many "swampy" canvases behind him. His studio was filled with them. He used to take



them from the floor and work upon them, sometimes half a dozen in a day. He never was "the perfect master of the brush" that we have heard him called, though he was an acceptable, and often a very powerful, technician. He usually began by basing a canvas in a warm gray or a raw umber tint, afterward sketching in with charcoal or pencil the general outline of forms and objects. His pigments at first were thin, and his canvas in its general distribution of masses was little more than stained. Upon that foundation he kept adding stronger notes, glazing his shadows to keep them transparent and push them back, and placing his opaque lights on top of the glaze. In this way he gradually developed the picture, keying up first one part and then another, until finally he drew the whole picture into unity and harmony.

It was most interesting to see Inness at work in this keying-up process. He always painted standing, and would walk backward and forward, putting on dabs here and rubs there with great expertness. He was a painter in oils, seldom employing any other medium, and yet he would use on his canvas almost anything that the impulse of the moment told him might prove effective. One day I watched him for fifteen minutes trying to deepen the shadows in a tree with a lead-pencil. The canvas was dry at the time and he did not want to put any more wet paint upon it. As he painted he talked,



argued, declaimed, glared at you over the top of his glasses with apparently little embarrassment to himself or detriment to his canvas.

Painting he believed he had reduced to a scientific formula, but he kept changing the formula. Rules of procedure, too, he had in abundance, but they also kept shifting. At one time he insisted that a picture should have three planes—the middle plane to contain the centre of interest, the foreground to be a prologue, and the background an epilogue to this central plane. At another time he would spread a half-tone throughout the whole picture, keeping his sky low in key, and upon this neutral ground he would place lights and darks, making them brilliant and sparkling by contrast. Others before him—notably the Fontainebleau-Barbizon men—had worked with similar rules in mind, but Inness was quite original in his application. And he was always moving on to something new and better. Ripley Hitchcock quotes from one of his letters:

“I have changed from the time I commenced because I had never completed my art; and as I do not care about being a cake, I shall remain dough, subject to any impression which I am satisfied comes from the region of truth.”

What Inness was at the time he commenced may be gathered from another quotation from the same authority:

“My early and much of my later life was borne

under the distress of a fearful nervous disease which very much impaired my ability to bear the painstaking in my studies which I could have wished. I began, of course, as most boys do, but without any art surroundings whatever. A boy now would be able to commence almost anywhere under better auspices than I could have had then, even in a city. I was in the barefoot stage, and, although my father was a well-to-do farmer, the boys dressed very much in Joseph's coat style as to color, the different garments being equally variegated, while schooling consisted of the three R's, and a ruler, with a rattan by way of change."

At fourteen Inness received some instruction in drawing from a man named Barker, and at nineteen he was working as a map-engraver with Sherman and Smith in New York. It is said that he engraved several plates, but Inness himself evidently counted this apprenticeship of little value, for he later said:

"When almost twenty I had a month with Regis Gignoux, my health not permitting me to take advantage of study at the Academy in the evening, and this is all the instruction I ever had from any artist."

He was virtually self-taught as a youth, but his later work was developed and somewhat influenced by the study of other painters at home and abroad. At first he studied Cole and Durand, and his pictures were rather panoramic

in theme and hard in drawing. He worked much over detail, and at this early time must have been acquired a knowledge of form and a store of visual memories which were to serve him thereafter. The brittle landscapes of Inness's youth are seldom seen to-day. What became of them no one knows. He sold them for any sum that would temporarily keep the wolf from the door, and, passing into the hands of unappreciative people, they have perhaps perished. I never heard him so much as mention his very early work, though in his letter to Ripley Hitchcock he speaks of some of his studies under Gignoux as being "very elaborate."

In 1850 he was married, and through the assistance of one of his patrons, Mr. Ogden Haggerty, he went to Italy and spent fifteen months there, returning through Paris, seeing the Salon, and the work of Rousseau for the first time.

"Rousseau was just beginning to make a noise. A great many people were grouped about a little picture of his which seemed to me metallic. Our traditions were English; and French art, particularly in landscape, had made but little impression upon us."

Just when he made this statement is not apparent, but certainly it was not his final estimate of Rousseau and French landscape. He was later on much influenced by Corot, Rousseau, and Daubigny; but with his first long stay in Europe,



chiefly near Rome, it was to be expected that the romance and glamour of the place with such classical painters as Salvator, Claude, and Poussin would sway him.

The second period of his development, dating from about 1853 to 1875, is full of diverse influences. Succeeding trips to Europe and repeated studies of European art rather disturbed his preconceived opinions, and made him doubtful. At one time he would work in one vein; at another time he would reverse himself and go back to his early affinities. It was a period of struggle not only with his art but with the more purely material affair of gaining a livelihood. He lived during this time for four years at Medfield, Massachusetts, then at Eagleswood, New Jersey; and in both places painted some notable canvases, though they were not popular with the buying public.

The "Peace and Plenty," now at the Metropolitan Museum, painted in 1865, is a huge affair, and the wonder is that it was not a huge failure. It is a little too diversified in the lights, and a bit spotty, perhaps, but it is rather broadly handled with a flat brush, and, all told, a remarkable canvas for the time. It represents him under Italian inspiration. The "Evening at Medfield," also in the Metropolitan, painted in 1875, suggests French influence, perhaps Daubigny. It is broader, freer, thinner in handling, simpler in masses, and has more unity.

None of the pictures at this period are counted his best output, but they are not the less works of decided merit.

It was after four continuous years in Europe (1871-1875) that Inness came into a third style of work (the "Evening at Medfield" indicates it), quite his own, quite American, and quite splendid. It was during this stay abroad that he seemed finally to find himself. His brush broadened, his light grew more subtle, his color became richer and fuller. Corot had taught him how to sacrifice detail to the mass, Rousseau had improved his use of the tree, Daubigny gave him many hints about atmosphere; from Decamps he learned how to drive a light with darks, and Delacroix opened to him a gamut of deep, rich color. He was now in position to graft the French tradition of landscape upon the American stock. And this he did, but in his own manner and with many lapses, even failures, by the way.

All through this third period, and for that matter up to his death, Inness was experimenting with landscape. Every canvas was a new adventure in color, light, and air. In his last period he seemed to see landscape in related masses of color rather than in linear extensions; and so he painted it holding the color patches together with air and illuminating the whole mass by a half-mysterious light. It was not attenuated color—mauves, pinks, and sad grays—but strong reds, blues, greens, and yellows



**“Evening at Medfield,” by George Inness.**

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





keyed up oftentimes to a high pitch and fire-hued by sunlight. Nor were they put on the canvas in little dots and dabs, but rather shown in large masses brought together for massed effect and made resonant by contrast.

Almost all of his later pictures will be found to hinge upon color, light, and atmosphere. He was very fond of moisture-laden air, rain effects, clouds, rainbows, mists, vapors, fogs, smokes, hazes—all phases of the atmosphere. In the same way he fancied dawns, dusks, twilights, moonlights, sunbursts, flying shadows, clouded lights—all phases of illumination. And again, he loved sunset colors, cloud colors, sky colors, autumn tints, winter blues, spring grays, summer greens—all phases of color. And these not for themselves alone, but rather for the impression or effect that they produced. If he painted a moonlight, it was with a great spread of silvery radiance, a hushed effect in the trees, a still air, and the mystery of things half seen; when he painted an early spring morning, he gave the vapor rising from the ground, with dampness in the air, voyaging clouds, and a warming blue in the sky; with an Indian summer afternoon there was the drowsy hum of nature lost in dreamland and the indefinable regret of things passing away. His "Rainy Day—Montclair" has the bend and droop of foliage heavy with rain, the sense of saturation in earth and air, the suggestion of the

very smell of rain. The "Delaware Water Gap" shows the drive of a storm down the valley, with the sweep of the wind felt in the clouds, the trees, and the water. The "Summer Silence" is well named, for again it gives that feeling of the hushed woods in July, the deep shadows, the dense foliage that seems to sleep and softly breathe.

Always the impression—the feeling which he himself felt in the presence of nature and tried to give back in form and color upon canvas. I remember very well standing beside him before his "Niagara" and hearing him say what interested him in that scene. It was not so much the thundering mass of the waters, the volume and power, the sublimity of the cataract, as the impression of clouds of mist and vapor boiling up from the great caldron and being struck into color-splendor by the sunlight. Only an Inness in the presence of Niagara could have thrown emphasis upon so ethereal a phase as its mists and color. They made the impression and he responded to it.

Every feature of landscape had its peculiar sentiment to him. He said so many times and with no uncertain voice:

"Rivers, streams, the rippling brook, the hill-side, the sky, clouds—all things that we see—can convey sentiment if we are in the love of God and the desire of truth. Some persons suppose that landscape has no power of convey-





“Sunset at Montclair,” by George Inness.



ing human sentiment. But this is a great mistake. The civilized landscape peculiarly can; and therefore I love it more and think it more worthy of reproduction than that which is savage and untamed. It is more significant."

That last statement of his about the civilized landscape is well worth noting, because that was the landscape he painted. His subjects are related to human life, and some of our interest in his pictures is due to the fact that he gives us thoughts, emotions, and sensations that are comprehensible by all. He tells things that every one may have thought but no one before him so well expressed. In other words, he brings our own familiar landscape home to us with new truth and beauty. This, it may be presumed, is the function of the poet and the painter in any land. It was the quality that made Burns and Wordsworth great and may account in measure for the fame of Rembrandt, Hobbema, Constable—yes, and Inness.

When he was young there were traditions of the Hudson River school in the air. The "mappy" landscape with its crude color and theatrical composition held the place of honor. Inness was probably captivated by it at first sight, but he soon discovered its emptiness. It had no basis in nature; it was not the landscape we see and know. The "Course of Empire" and the "Voyage of Youth" were only names for studio fabrications. The truly poetic landscape



lay nearer home. This was what Inness called the "civilized landscape," the familiar landscape, the *paysage intime*, the one we all see and know because it has always been before us—its very nearness perhaps blinding us to its beauty.

How hard it is to believe that the true poetry of the world lies close about us! We keep fancying that romance is not in our native village, but in Rome or Constantinople or Cairo; and that the poetic landscape is not that of the wood-lot behind the house, but that of Arden Forest or some Hesperidian garden far removed from us. Emerson has noted that at sea every ship looks romantic but the one we sail in. Yet there is plenty of romance in our ship if we have the eyes to see it; and there is abundance of beauty in the wood-lot if we have the intentness of purpose to study it out and understand it. Any one can admire the "view" from a mountain-top, but it takes some imagination to see beauty in the quiet meadow. And after you have seen it it requires a great deal of labor and skill to tell what you have seen. Wordsworth and Constable made more failures with it than successes. Just so with Inness. He shot wide of the mark innumerable times, but when he hit, it was with very decided effect.

A love of the familiar landscape would seem to have always been with Inness. After a period of following the Hudson River panorama of nature undefiled by man, he gave it up. While

in Rome he produced some semiclassic landscapes, but he gave them up, too. Not so with the Fontainebleau-Barbizon landscape. Rousseau and his band had broken with the classic and were producing the *paysage intime* to which Hobbema (not Constable, of whom they knew nothing) had called their attention through his pictures in the Louvre. They had done in France just what Inness had sought to do in America: they had abandoned the grandiloquent and put in its place the familiar. Inness was in sympathy with them almost from the moment he first saw their work. Had he been born in France, no doubt he would have been a member of the Rousseau-Dupré group.

Again it is worth noticing in passing that all of the so-called "men of 1830" were really provincial in what they produced. Corot painted Ville d'Avray, Rousseau, Dupré, and Diaz the Fontainebleau forest, Daubigny the Seine and the Marne. None of their work represents the south or the east of France, and none of it carries beyond France. It is localized about Paris. Just so with the work of Inness. It is emphatically American, but limited to the North Atlantic States. The appearances which he portrayed are peculiar to the region lying east of the Alleghanies. In his pictures the light and coloring, the forms and drift of clouds, the mists and hazes, the trees and hills, the swamps and meadows may be recognized as belonging to New

Jersey or New York or New England, but none of them belongs to Minnesota or Louisiana or California. He pictured the American landscape perhaps more completely than any other painter before or since his time; but his "civilized landscape" was nevertheless limited as regards its geographical range.

Nor would we have it otherwise. All the masters of art have been provincial so far as subject goes. Titian, Velasquez, and Rembrandt never cared to go beyond their own bailiwicks for material. And Inness—though he may not rank with those just mentioned—found all the material he needed within fifty miles of New York. It was the discovery of this material, his point of view regarding it, what he did with it, and what he made us see in it, that perhaps gives him his high rank in American art.

The man and his impulsive nature never changed, though he kept shifting his methods and his point of view from year to year. He went his own pace and was always something of a recluse. The art movements about him interested him in only a slight way. The Academy of Design honored him with membership, but he cared little about it. The Society of American Artists elected him a member also, but he cared even less for the brilliant painting of the young men than for the weak performances of the academicians. He kept very much to himself and painted on in his own absorbed, impulsive fash-





"Hackensack Meadows," by George Inness.



ion. His studio was only a bare barn of a room with a few crazy chairs in it. Wall-hangings, stuffs, screens, brass pots, shields, spears—the artistic plunder which one usually finds in a painter's apartment—he regarded as so much trumpery. In his later days he came and went to his studio from Montclair, seeing landscapes out of the car-window, and in his mind's eye seeing them upon his canvases. His art swayed him completely.

He had no pupils, though he corrected, advised, and instructed many young painters after his own method. It was a decidedly arbitrary teaching. Elliott Daingerfield tells a story of one of his own landscapes in which a rail fence was running down into the foreground. When Inness was asked in to criticise the canvas, he objected to the fence and said it should be taken out.

“Why can't I have the fence there if I want it?” Daingerfield protested. To which Inness replied:

“You can if you want to be an idiot.”

His criticism of older painters and pictures was just as unqualified. And in matters outside of art, where he spoke with no peculiar authority, his vehemence was no less. Crossing on the *Arizona* in 1887, he talked every one out of the smoking-room on the Single Tax question, so a friend informs me. In 1894, when I happened to be crossing with him, he was as positive as ever about his religious, socialistic, and politi-



cal convictions. His interest and enthusiasm were in no degree abated. In the mornings he sat on deck wrapped up in rugs under the lee of a life-boat, and amused himself doing examples in vulgar fractions out of an ordinary school arithmetic; but in the afternoon he liked to talk, and I was a willing listener, though I had heard him discourse many times.

Every one remembers his caustic criticism of Turner's "Slave Ship." He always had a kick for Turner, though at heart he admired him, and in many respects his own methods were very like that master. They both worked from visual memory, Turner putting in what pleased him in architecture, people, and boats; and Inness putting in cows or bridges or wagons, as pleased him. Neither painter resorted to the model or to a sketch for these accessories. They painted them out of their heads, and sometimes they were vague in drawing or false in lighting. The only difference was that Turner took more liberties with his text than Inness, and often lost truth of tone. This gave Inness his chance to say that Turner was a painter of claptrap—his detail was spotty, he could paint figures in a boat, but he couldn't paint a boat with figures.

For Gainsborough he had some admiration, and in his early days rather followed him, but he outgrew the brown-fiddle tone of Gainsborough's foliage and came to think his work lacking

in color. Constable, too, he admired, perhaps because he painted the greens of foliage very frankly; but his light and color were cold. Turner's heat and Constable's cold he did not believe could both come out of England, except through subjective distortion. The pictures of Watts, he insisted, looked as though dipped in a sewer, so unhealthy and morbid were they in color. This referred to the later pictures of Watts which Inness had seen in a loan collection exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum. He was fond of brilliant color himself, and evidently he had never studied the earlier and middle-period pictures of Watts. Wilson he liked, though recognizing that he was merely a reviser of the old classic formula of landscape. But Wilson knew how to handle his sky and could tie things together with atmosphere.

Corot was a very pretty painter—and by "pretty," Inness meant clever. He wagged his head in saying it and smiled as though the statement were incontestable. The sentiment of light and air with Corot was something that Inness thoroughly understood. And he greatly fancied Corot's composition. At one time he painted pictures that have a Corotesque arrangement—notably the "Wood Gatherers," formerly in the Clarke Collection. What he did not understand was Corot's monotony of color, or, as other painters expressed it, Corot's refinement of color. Millet was wonderful, especially in his landscape-

work, which had attracted so little attention. Delacroix was one of the great gods for his wonderful gamut of color, if nothing else. And so on.

The steamer trip in 1894 was the last one that Inness made. He died that summer at the Bridge of Allan in Scotland. His funeral was held in the National Academy of Design in New York, and the Swedenborgian minister who officiated, in the course of his eulogy, said: "Those of you who knew George Inness knew how intense a man he was." "Intense" is exactly descriptive of the man. He was keyed up all his life and worked with feverish intensity. But the word does not describe his art, for that has no feeling of stress or strain about it. Sometimes one is conscious of its vagueness, as though the painter were groping a way out toward the light—a vagueness that holds the mystery of things half seen, a beautiful glimpse of half-revealed impressions. But usually his pictures are serene, hushed, and yet radiant with the glow of eternal sun-fires from sky or cloud.

They were lofty and poetic impressions, and the loftier they were the more intense the painter's effort to reveal them. The heights of Parnassus are very calm, but they are not reached without a struggle. The great ones—those who scale the upper peaks—are perhaps the most intensive strugglers of all. Inness was one of them.



III

ALEXANDER H. WYANT



### III

## ALEXANDER H. WYANT

It was Corot who declared that in art Rousseau was an eagle and he himself was merely a lark singing a song from the meadow-grasses. The contrast and the comparison are not inapplicable to two of our own painters. Wyant never possessed the wide range or the far-seeing eye of Inness, but he had something about him of Corot's mood and charm. He, too, was a lark, or should we say a wood-thrush singing along the edge of an American forest? He had only a few mellow notes, yet we would not be without them. They still charm us. And it is not certain that in the long account of time the direct and simple utterances of Corot and Wyant may not outlive the wide truth of Rousseau and the vision splendid of Inness. More than once in æsthetic story the songs of a Burns have been held more precious than the tumults of a Milton.

The wonder of Wyant's success is greater than that of Inness, for his boyhood surroundings, if anything, were less stimulating and his pictorial education far more restricted. Besides, Inness lived on to seventy years, but Wyant died at fifty-six, having endured ill-health, and for



the last ten years of his life—his best working years—been paralyzed in his right arm and hand. Living much to himself, something of a hermit in his mountain home, weighed down by misfortunes and disappointments, the wonder grows that he not only kept up and improved his technique to the end, but that he preserved his serenity of mood and purity of outlook through it all. He must have been a man with fortitude of soul beyond the average. It is not every painter that can turn stumbling-blocks into stepping-stones.

Wyant was the typical barefoot boy of the near West in the days before the Civil War. He was born in 1836 at Evans Creek, Tuscarawas County, Ohio, and his boyhood and early youth were far removed from anything like the madding crowd. His parents were Americans of the soil, his father being a farmer and carpenter of Pennsylvania extraction, and his mother of Dutch-Irish descent. They were nomadic, after the manner of border people, and soon left Evans Creek to live in or near Defiance, where Wyant learned his three R's in the village school. There were less than one thousand people in the town at that time, and what Wyant got out of it by way of enlightenment or encouragement must have been meagre. As a boy he, no doubt, roamed the woods, fished the streams, and trailed along the Ohio hilltops; and at this time, unconsciously perhaps, he was storing up

visual memories of appearances that were to be of service to him later on.

That he had an eye and was an observer from the start comes to us in the tales told of his boyish sketches on the floor made with charcoal from the wood-fire. At least they showed an inclination that was afterward to develop into a passion. But the inclination found no immediate outlet. After leaving school the youth served as an apprentice in a harness-shop, but he did not care for harness-making. He preferred to paint photographs, cards, signs—almost anything that could be done with a brush. At twenty-one he went to Cincinnati and for the first time saw some paintings in oil. Before that his ideas of art had been bounded by book illustration and the omnipresent chromo. It is said that among the pictures he saw at Cincinnati was something by Inness. The young man was impressed by it, or by the reports about Inness, for he took the train to New York to consult that master about art as a vocation.

He found Inness at Eagleswood, near Perth Amboy. How long he stopped there and what was said we do not know, but the master was encouraging, and the young man went back to Cincinnati determined to be a painter. He had a right instinct about art at that early time or he never would have chosen Inness for a counsellor. The famous landscape-painters then were

Kensett and Church. Inness was the most progressive, the most ultra-modern of the time, and had not yet won universal applause. He did not paint enough in detail for the man in the street, and evidently he must have given Wyant his argument for breadth of view over detail, for, as we shall presently see, Wyant had it almost from the start. But perhaps the most and the best that he got from Inness was inspiration.

Back in Cincinnati and painting pictures after his own formula, Wyant found a purchaser and a patron in Nicholas Longworth. It became possible for him shortly thereafter to move to New York. There, in 1863, he saw a large exhibition of Düsseldorf pictures that probably stirred his imagination. Pictures in America at that time were rather scarce, and any exhibition of foreign work would be more impressive than now. The next year he exhibited at the National Academy of Design for the first time, and in 1865 he went to Europe on a Düsseldorf pilgrimage, impelled thereto by a mountain-and-waterfall landscape of Gude which he had seen in New York.

He went straight to Gude at Karlsruhe and put himself under his tutelage. Gude was a Norwegian painter, influenced by Dahl, and imbued with the Düsseldorf method and point of view. The grand landscape—panoramic in extent and mountainous in height, with a hot sun



in the heavens—was then in vogue, and Achenbach was its prophet. From Wyant's short stay with Gude it seems that his enthusiasm was soon chilled down to zero. In after-life he often referred to the great kindness of Gude and his wife, but he seemed to think that his instruction in art had been fundamentally wrong. His pupil, Bruce Crane, says that he spoke of his art environment there as being "a miserable one," and Wyant believed that "environment played the greater part in the making of a painter for good or bad."

He left Gude and started back to America, but stopped on the way in England and Ireland, where he studied pictures and painted some of his own. The old masters in the National Gallery apparently did not make a strong appeal to him. His work shows no sign of Claude, Salvator, Poussin, Ruysdael, Hobbema, or Cuyp. Even Gainsborough and the ascendant Turner seem to have left him cold. But Constable he liked very much. Here at last was a man seeing things in a large way and doing them with breadth of brush. Moreover, he was doing simple transcripts of nature, not the panorama of blazing perspective. In America Wyant had inherited something of the spectacular from his Hudson River predecessors; Düsseldorf had aided the conception, and Turner had abetted it; but Constable seemed to be against it. Wyant was inclined to renounce it. Constable produced

the broad realistic look, and at that time Wyant had probably not arrived at any other conception of art than as a large transcript of nature. Ruskin's doctrine of fidelity to fact was in the air, and the landscape as emotional expression, or as a symphony, or even as a decorative pattern, was little known either in the studios or the critic's den. There was, however, plenty of controversy going on. And yet fresh from varying theories and impressions, Wyant went over to Ireland and painted pictures that bore no earmark of any painter or any school.

In the Metropolitan Museum there is an Irish landscape by him done in 1866—"View in County Kerry, Ireland." There are gray mountains at the back, a green foreground with a pool of water, a gray-blue and whitish sky, a gray atmosphere. At the right middle distance is a white cottage. The rest is treeless upland running into mountain heights that are lost in haze and cloud. The picture is not only remarkable for its simplicity of composition but its absence of small objects or distracting details. Though a mountain landscape, it is broadly seen, largely and simply massed, and painted with a broad flat brush. It may have been repainted in later years, but I am willing to believe from the breadth of its composition that it was painted broadly to correspond, and is to-day substantially as when originally done.

This picture is in somewhat violent contrast

with another Wyant landscape hanging in the same gallery and dated in the same year—1866. I refer to the large “Mohawk Valley” landscape—an excellent picture, though evidencing limitations perhaps peculiar to America. It is a huge valley view with a gorge and stream in the foreground running down to a fall from which mist is rising. The stream as a pool is seen again emerging in the middle distance. A half-lighted sky with falling rain at the left and warm grays of clouds and blues of distance make up the background, while in the foreground a tall tree at the left is balanced by a group of lesser trees at the right. The whole color-tone is warm (probably from underbasing), especially in the foreground, which shows in grays and browns. It is a symmetrical composition with a central point of sight, and in its detailed elaboration gives no hint of selection or sacrifice. The trees, the ledges of rock in the foreground, the water, the clouds are all exactly drawn and realized to the last item, each one having quite as much importance as its fellow. As for the painting, it is thin, kept thin to allow the underbasing to show through; but it is flatly painted, not stippled. In the latter respect it is an advance on, say, Church’s panorama, “Heart of the Andes,” in the same gallery, where the stippling with white paint produces a glittering, bedizened surface, and the minute drawing of leaves in the foreground runs into petty niggling.



Now, the "Mohawk Valley" was probably completed just before Wyant went to Europe; at least in method it antedates the "County Kerry, Ireland," landscape of the same year.\* It is a very important picture and represents the culmination of Wyant's early style—a beautiful picture for any place or period or painter to have produced. It shows Wyant's original point of view, with some of the influences that must have come to him from the Hudson River school, from Inness, from various unknown American sources. But the "County Kerry, Ireland," landscape shows a departure, a widening, and a broadening of both brush and vision which were to increase and expand thereafter into a second style—the style of Wyant's later and nobler canvases. To this style Wyant was undoubtedly helped at first by what he saw abroad, especially by the pictures of Constable.

This was a time of rapid production with Wyant and he was always afire with his theme. The recognition of artists was coming to him if not the large patronage of the public. His picture

\* "In regard to the two pictures in the Metropolitan Museum, 'View in County Kerry, Ireland,' and the 'Mohawk Valley,' I never could reconcile myself to the idea that they were both painted in 1866. There is no doubt about the 'Mohawk Valley' because its manner is so much like the many canvases of that period which Wyant often showed me and which Mrs. Wyant destroyed after his death. The 'View in County Kerry, Ireland,' marks a new period in his art and the widely different handling as well as view-point are too much to have been acquired in one year. There is certainly some mistake in the date—I should say a difference of ten years. At some time that picture has been cleaned and the restorer accidentally destroying the date restored it incorrectly."—*(Bruce Crane in a letter to the writer, December 13, 1917.)*



“Mohawk Valley,” by Alexander H. Wyant.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





of a "View on the Susquehanna" resulted in his being elected an associate of the National Academy in 1868, and he was named a full academician in 1869. But ill-health was with him, and in the hope of improving his physical condition and at the same time gathering material for his art, he joined in 1873 a government expedition to New Mexico and Arizona. There were many hardships on the trip, and Wyant's never very robust constitution broke down under the strain. He was put on the train and sent back East. It is said that on the way East he passed his home town of Defiance, but would not get off. Ill as he was, with few friends and less money, he determined to go on to New York and fight it out. The fine courage of all that becomes more marked when we understand that the illness was so severe that it had resulted at Fort Wingate in paralysis of his right hand and arm. He was never to paint with his right hand again. It was a crippled painter coming back to New York—crippled in a vital spot—but he had determined that his left hand should be trained to service. And it was.

The West not only maimed him physically but apparently taught him nothing artistically. The deserts that he crossed with their red porphyry mountains, dull-yellow sands, and gas-blue air—the most wonderful landscapes in the world in their definition of form and their quality of color—seem to have made no impres-

sion whatever upon him. This is understandable only by considering the inheritance of tradition and environment. In Wyant's time a handsome landscape meant a mountain-valley with forests, rocks, waterfalls, and the variegated foliage of summer or autumn. The desert was unknown and remained for a later generation of painters to discover; the plains were unpainted and thought unpaintable; even the marsh and the meadow, which Corot loved, were considered too slight for art. The grand-view conception in landscape-painting died hard. In Wyant's time it was very much alive. Naturally enough, he was impressed by it, and though in later life he did many small intimate bits of nature, he never got away entirely from the wide mountain-valley theme.

He was, in fact, always a mountain lover. After his return to New York he spent much of his summer-time in the Adirondacks. He was then deeply interested in the pictures of the Barbizon-Fontainebleau painters which were coming into the United States. So outspoken was his admiration for Rousseau that he sent a picture to the Academy with the title "In the Spirit of Rousseau." His own style was growing broader and simpler each year, and, strange enough, the public was buying his pictures. He became measurably prosperous, had a studio in the Y.M.C.A. Building in Twenty-third Street, and received a number of pupils. One of his pupils, a Miss Locke, he married in 1880.

After his marriage much time was spent in the Keene Valley, and in 1889 he moved to Arkville in the Catskills, where with a fine sweeping outlook from his porch upon woods, valleys, and hills he found enough material to last him the rest of his life. He saw little of the town thereafter. He had never mingled freely with his fellow man. The Society of American Artists had honored him with membership in 1878, he was a founder of the American Water-Color Society, and a member of the Century Association, but he always held somewhat aloof from them. Friendly enough with painters and people who sought him, he was, nevertheless, a little shy, which perhaps gave him the reputation of being gruff. He seemed less fitted to the city street than the aisle of the forest. It was in his mountain home on the forest edge that he died in 1892, having suffered much physical pain before his going.\*

Like many another painter, Wyant doubtless knew infinite regrets that he could not live to complete his art. For he never believed in his having reached a final goal, and was always changing, experimenting, trying to better his work. My first meeting with him must have been in 1882. I seem to remember him seated before

\* "I met Wyant in 1876; his right arm was then practically useless. Later on his right side was affected, and the last six years he was compelled to walk sideways. Yet through all these years of suffering he worked day and night, and during the last six years, when his suffering was the worst, he recorded on canvas some of the beautiful things that survive him."—(*Bruce Crane, ibid.*)



a picture with his palette fastened to the easel, his right arm hanging rather limp, and his left hand holding a brush. There was nothing noteworthy about the meeting except that his first words were a request that I should tell him what was wrong with the picture on the easel. He was so anxious to get a new view-point that he was quite willing to listen to a stranger, whether he spoke with authority or not. Of course I did not venture to say anything other than in praise of the canvas, though as I now remember it the picture was bothering him and looked a little tortured in its surface.

He worried a good deal over many of his pictures. When Inness came in to see him he relieved the strain in his impetuous way by taking up Wyant's palette and brushes to add a touch here and there. The result usually was that the canvas grew into an Inness before the acquiescent Wyant's eyes. There was so much of this that Mrs. Wyant finally forbade Inness her husband's studio—at least that is the story told by the Inness family. But Wyant would do anything, submit to anything, for the love of painting. Bruce Crane writes me:

“How that man did love to paint! I often thought he worked too hard, sometimes failing to get his breath between canvases. He wished always to be alone so that he could paint, paint, not for praise nor emolument; never with the thought of reward. I recall Z. visiting the studio

one day and remarking that he, Z, would like to be considered the best landscape-painter in America. After he left, Wyant said: "What a h— of an ambition!"

Loving the mountains and the forests as he did, it was to be expected that he would use them in art. It was his earliest inheritance and his latest love. Any one at all familiar with the Adirondacks or the Catskills will recognize in Wyant's landscapes not their topography, perhaps, but their characteristics. The valleys, the side-hills with outcropping rock, the pines, beeches, and birches, the little streams and pools, the clearings with their brush-edgings, are all there. Wyant arranged them in his pictures with the skill of a Japanese placing flowers in a pot. He made not so much of a bouquet as an arabesque of trees and foliage, illuminated by sunlight filtered through thin clouds at the back and warmed with golden-gray colors. Atmosphere—the silvery-blue air of the mountains—held the pattern together, lent it sentiment, sometimes (with shadow masses) gave it mystery.

Perhaps the best illustration of this in any public gallery is the "Broad Silent Valley" in the Metropolitan Museum. It is doubtful if Wyant ever expressed himself better or more completely than in this picture. It is a large upright canvas, the very shape of which adds to the dignity and loftiness of the composition placed upon it. At the left are half a dozen large

trees, at the right a rocky hillside, in the central plane a reflecting pool of water, at the back a high, clouded sky, radiant with the light beyond it. Simple in materials, not brilliant in color but rather sombre in tones of golden gray, devoid of any classic or romantic interest, it is nevertheless profoundly impressive in its fine sentiment of light, air, and color. It is as strong almost as a Rousseau in its foreground and trees, and as charming as a Corot in its light and air. But you cannot detect either Corot or Rousseau in it. When it was painted, Wyant was greatly taken with those painters, but he did not imitate or follow them. His pictures were always his own—the “Broad Silent Valley” not excepted.

The beauty and charm of its sentiment with the wonder of its strong mental grasp are paralleled by the workmanship displayed. Looking closely at the canvas, one finds it not heavily loaded, but dragged broadly and laid flatly with pigment. The ground has been underbased in warm browns, the shadows kept transparent and distant by glazes, the lights put in with opaque pigments. The handling is very broad if thin, and there has been little or no kneading or emendation or fumbling. It is straightforward flat painting of a masterful kind. And this was done with that late-trained left hand!

As for the drawing, it does not bother with the edges of objects, but concentrates force on the body and bulk—the color mass. Wyant had





"Broad, Silent Valley," by Alexander H. Wyant.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



learned linear drawing with the exactness of a Durand and used it in his early pictures, but he soon outgrew the fancy for photographic detail. It was not effective. And he could give the solidity of a ledge of rock or the lightness of a floating cloud much better with a broader brush. As he grew in art his brush continued to broaden. His work became more sketchy, his brush freer and fuller, and possibly before he died he may have heard his work referred to as "impressionistic"—heaven save the word!

The general public usually regards any breadth of brush-work whatever as a sign of impressionism. The term in its present meaning, or lack of meaning, covers a multitude of stupidities. Every one who paints gives an impression because he cannot give anything else. Realism is a misnomer. The real is nature itself, and art is the report about the real made by the painter. If it is a minute report of surface detail that can be seen through a magnifying-glass the public immediately dubs it realistic; if it is a broad report that ignores the surface detail for bulk, mass, and body, it is called impressionistic. But the difference is merely between the smallness and the largeness of the view-point. The great landscapists have usually regarded a tree as more important in its shadow masses and volume than in its leaves, a rock as more impressive in its weight than its veins or stains, a bar of sunlight more striking in its luminosity than in its



sharp-cut edges. Seeing and painting that way it is easy to comprehend how they should be set down as impressionists when in a large sense they are making more faithful record than the men who see only the surface glitter. Such men were Corot, Constable, Inness, Wyant, not to mention Manet or Monet.

Wyant probably came to that point of view at first through Inness and then, later on, through Constable, Corot, and Rousseau. It was the right point of view, though he never gave it with quite the breadth of Corot or with the solid painting of Rousseau. His canvases were always sufficiently covered with pigment, but no more. Some of his late pictures show a freer use of pigment, but he seldom if ever did any fat or unctuous painting, and never painted for mere display of dexterity. He had certain formulas of composition, methods of getting certain effects that he employed continuously. For instance, he liked a dark foreground, a lighted middle distance, and a veiled sunlight effect at the back. To avoid the obviousness of this composition he often introduced light spots from a pool in the dark foreground and dark stumps or tree trunks in the light middle distance, or otherwise varied the contrast of light with dark. But these with glazed shadows and opaque high lights were not exactly painter's tricks but rather the conventional practices of the studio at that time.

Wyant up to the last ten years of his life painted much out of doors and directly from the model. From that he got exact knowledge of forms, lights, and colors, so that in after-years he was able to draw and paint largely from visual memory. Working directly from the model led him into much detail, and some of his earlier pictures are burdened with a multitude of facts, but when he worked from memory in the studio all that was changed. He simplified his composition to a few large masses, threw out detail, and depended for effect largely upon light, air, and diffused color. A little valley view with half a dozen beeches at the left, a clump of bushes with a ledge of rock at the right, a veiled distance—that was enough for him.

Occasionally in his pictures one sees a white cottage in the background, a road or a bridge; but these do not occur frequently, and I cannot remember any picture by him that shows man, woman, or child. The human interest was not his. He believed that nature was sufficient unto itself and needed no association with mankind to make it beautiful or interesting. So long had he looked at nature and studied her appearances, so long had he marvelled and brooded over her grandeur and beauty, so long had he loved the veiled mountain light, the blue air, and the forest shadow, that finally he came to have a way of seeing things, a point of view about nature that by its intensity and depth was perhaps ab-

normal. He saw not as we see but as an absorbed nature-lover sees. The disturbing prose of facts was no longer there. The poetry of light, air, and color alone remained.

In his first endeavors when he painted from the model he recited the beauty of the facts and perhaps thought they would be sufficient to carry the picture. Nature was beautiful in itself; if faithfully transcribed on canvas why would not the beauty carry on into the transcription? He found later on that it would not and could not, that the counterfeit presentment remained only a counterfeit presentment. Then he began to simplify his matter and broaden his method, seeking not to reproduce the original but to give merely the feeling or impression that the original had made upon him. The result was that peculiarly poetic quality of light, air, and color that we associate with such pictures as the "Broad Silent Valley."

Of its kind no finer quality of pictorial poetry was ever produced than is shown in Wyant's later landscapes. It is not exactly epic, though it has wonderful descriptive passages, sustained effect, and often very positive strength of utterance. Lyric is the term that describes it better. For it is a song rather than a recitation—a wood theme worthy of a Pan's piping, though it gives no hint of the Old World, and belongs emphatically in this new Western land with its unbroken soil and virgin forests. In aim and effect it is not



unlike the pæan in praise of light by Corot. They were both painter-poets—the one painting on the outskirts of Paris, the other gathering his material on the outskirts of civilization here in America.

Inness, Wyant, Homer Martin, Winslow Homer—no one ever questioned the Americanism of their art. They are our very own—the product of this new soil. Even their limitations recite our history. As for their aspirations, with their passionate love for the beauty of our own American landscape, may it not be fairly claimed that in these they are representative of the American people? In a large sense have they not been our pictorial spokesmen, saying in art what many of us have always felt but could not well express?

And Wyant—Wyant with the wood-thrush note—well, we shall not look upon his like again! For he and Martin were perhaps rarer spirits, finer souls, than either Inness or Homer. Their charm of mood, the serenity of their outlook, the loveliness of their vision will hardly be repeated in our art. They marked an epoch and belonged to a past that unfortunately is leaving no decided teaching or sequence in its wake. The trend in art to-day is not toward serenity but turbulence.



**IV**

**HOMER MARTIN**





## IV

### HOMER MARTIN

THE little aloofness of manner that prevented Wyant from being a pronounced social light was not a characteristic of Homer Martin. From his youth upward Martin was companionable, had in fact something of a genius for making friends. All through his life he maintained social relations with the wise and the witty of his time, moved in intellectual club circles, and both at home and abroad was accounted a man of mind, a rare *raconteur* and conversationalist, a most attractive personality. His droll comments and quick retorts are still told at his club, and form perhaps something of a contrast to his pictures hanging upon the walls near by.

For there was never anything amusing about Martin's art. He indulged in no drollery of the brush, and no intelligent person ever got a smile out of his canvases. They are serious, almost solemn, affairs. Mrs. Martin, in her delightful reminiscences of her husband, quotes John R. Dennett as saying that "Martin's landscapes look as if no one but God and himself had ever seen the places." There is, indeed, nothing of human interest about them. A distant figure

or a house is occasionally introduced as a light spot in a dark plane, or otherwise to help out the composition; but the figure always suggests a wraith or a spook, and the house is deserted or haunted. Says Mrs. Martin:

“There is an austerity, a remoteness, a certain savagery in even the sunniest and most peaceful of his landscapes, which were also in him, and an instinctive perception of which had made me say to him in the very earliest days of our acquaintance that he reminded me of Ishmael.”

There is no contradiction of character in these two phases of Martin's mentality. They argue merely versatility. He was exceedingly fond of the silent, even melancholy, beauty of nature, as he was of the solemn seriousness of fine poetry; but these were not themes for talk at the club. Mrs. Martin says she never heard him “talk shop” and that, with several notable exceptions such as La Farge and Winslow Homer, most of his close friends were people in other professions than painting. He never tabooed art as a topic of conversation, but he could talk on other themes quite as well. The mental facet that reflected him as a man of the world gave out a different light from that which proclaimed him a poet in landscape. His was not a one-facet mind.

What part heredity played in his equipment may only be guessed at. His father was a mild-mannered carpenter of New England descent, his mother a strong-willed, quick-witted woman



belonging to an old Albany family. It is usually assumed that Martin derived from his mother and got his artistic instincts from her. These latter, it seems, developed early—the mother testifying that before he was two years old she was accustomed to quiet him by giving him pencil and paper. At five he did what has been called a “spirited” drawing of a horse. Doubtless every one can remember something of the same sort told about his own infancy. The drawing habit is common to almost all children and usually means little.

But Martin was to demonstrate shortly that he could do nothing else but draw and make pictures. At school in Albany (where he had been born in 1836) he was not a shining success. He said himself that his school-days had been spent in looking through the windows at the Greenbush Hills and longing for the time when he could get over there and draw them. At thirteen his schooling ended, much to his after regret. He then went into his father’s carpenter-shop, but that proved as little attractive as the school-room. A clerkship in a store ended disastrously owing to his non-recognition of the amenities of business life. Then he entered an architect’s office and failed there because of defective eyesight. He could not see or draw a vertical line properly. Later on he was eliminated from the Civil War draft because of this same defective vision. His special fitness for the painter’s craft

was not very obvious at this time, and yet he was headed strongly that way.

It was E. D. Palmer, the sculptor, who persuaded the father to allow Martin to go on with art. Palmer was then the art oracle of Albany, with a little coterie of painters about him consisting of such men as James and William Hart, George H. Boughton, Edward Gay, Launt Thompson. Martin knew them as a boy; and, after sixteen, doing pretty much as he pleased, he frequented their studios, and for two weeks was a pupil of James Hart. That is the only direct instruction he ever received. Before he was twenty he had opened a studio of his own in Albany, was quite well known as a youthful prodigy, and was generally thought to have in him the making of an artist.

It was in Albany that he met and married in 1861 Elizabeth Gilbert Davis, a clever woman who afterward developed much literary ability and became well known not only as a reviewer in *The Nation* and other periodicals but as a novelist and magazine writer. The marriage was altogether fortunate and happy, though at times pecuniary difficulties incident to the artistic and literary life weighed heavily upon them. She was a rod and a staff to comfort him, and there is no record that she ever flinched or failed or regretted her choice. In their early married life there were few trials, she recording that they were fairly prosperous, that he received

numerous commissions for pictures, and that they had made many friends. They had stayed on in Albany until the winter of 1862-1863, and then had moved to New York. In 1864 he had a studio in the Tenth Street Building, and his near neighbors were Sandford Gifford, Hubbard, Griswold, J. G. Brown, McEntee, Eastman Johnson, and, later, John La Farge.

This was a time of comparatively rapid production with Martin and also a time when many influences might be supposed at work upon him; but in reality none of the influences seems to have made much of an impression. His early work is now infrequently seen, but what there is of it, though small, bright, and a little crude, is nevertheless quite distinctly Martinesque. He had, of course, inherited from the Hudson River school (a name that Professor Mather declares Martin originated) the "view" in landscape. With the panorama had come down the studio method of small detailed treatment, and Martin at first paid it allegiance but he very soon saw its defects. As a boy he could speak of a picture by his master, James Hart, as "a scene of niggled magnitude," and Mr. Brownell tells me that he had always talked much of "generalization" in landscape.

His early pictures show this generalization not so much perhaps in breadth of handling as in breadth of view. He was even then seeing the large elements of earth, air, water, and sky.



Naturally enough, his brush was a little fussy with foliage, dead-tree trunks, rock strata, and foreground properties in general; but he could see the unity of mountain ranges, the continuity of air, the omnipresent radiance of light, the great heave of the sky. He already had the vision but not, as yet, the full means of revealing it. It was practically the same nature that Cole and Church had seen, but they saw it in its surface aspect, where Martin saw it in its depth. The difference between them was the wide difference that divides the superficial from the profound.

With his early pictures Martin had made considerable success. As far back as 1857 he had exhibited at the National Academy of Design; in 1868 he was elected an associate of the Academy, and in 1874 he was made a full academician. His landscape material at first had been gathered in the Berkshires, then he seems to have tramped and sketched with Edward Gay in the Catskills. In the early sixties he went to the White Mountains, and from 1864 to 1869 he was every summer in the Adirondacks. In 1871 he went to Duluth, Minnesota, at the invitation of Jay Cooke, but the next year found him in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. He was a mountain lover, almost exclusively so, at this time, and apparently not quite happy away from them.

Professor Mather, who has closely traced Mar-

tin's career in a notable monograph,\* says that his sketches in this early period were made with a hard pencil on sheets of gray paper. They were minutely done, drawn in outline, without color, and with no dash or smudge or mere suggestion about them. The pictures painted from them in his studio were perhaps less detailed than the sketches, and as for their color, he no doubt relied upon his visual memory or his instinct for tone and harmony. After 1876 he began to use charcoal in sketching, and later on he took up water-colors and made drawings with them along the Saguenay and elsewhere. Doubtless these later sketch mediums had come to him on his first trip abroad in 1876.

The climax of his early work—that is, before 1876—seems to have been reached in such pictures as the “Lake Sandford.” It was shown at the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia in 1876, but painted probably as far back as 1870. The scene is in the Adirondacks, and Martin has pictured the lake looking down from a distant height. There is a dark foreground of outcropping rock, then the light-reflecting surface of the long lake, then a ridge of dark mountains, and back of that the light sky—four planes in alternations of dark and light. It is woods, rock, water, and sky—no more. The largeness of Martin's view, with its grasp of such

\* *Homer Martin: Poet in Landscape*, by Frank Jewett Mather, New York, 1912.

essential elements as light, air, and space, is quite apparent notwithstanding a handling that seems too small for it. There is no petty puttering over leaves and stones, but the small catches of light-and-dark in the foliage, the tree trunks, the rocks, the sharp, clean-drawn outlines conceal rather than reveal the conception. Moreover, the smooth, enamel-like surface seems to act as a binder and a restraint. An excellent picture, as many another that he painted during this period; but Martin had not yet entirely emerged from his early manner, was not yet expressing himself fully and freely.

At this time, no doubt, he had seen in America some works by Corot and the Barbizon men and had been impressed by them, but a new period was to begin for him with his first trip to Europe. This was in 1876. He went to England, where he met and became intimate with Whistler and Albert Moore, then to France, where he visited Barbizon, though Millet and Rousseau were dead. He also went to St. Cloud to see Corot's sketching-ground, and sketched there a bit himself. He did not do much painting. All of his sojourns abroad were times of study and observation. Mrs. Martin says that his working periods were very irregular, that he absorbed things by a slow means rather than painted by wilful effort; and he himself insisted that he could not paint without the impulse. Of course all this was set down to him as indolence by the



hypercritical, but at the present time it is well understood that mental preparedness is necessary for the production of any great work, and that periods of long reflection are not periods of idleness.

He returned to New York in December of the same year and took up his painting, but he was now making some decided changes in both his matter and his manner. The generous expanse of the panoramic view was cut down to more modest landscape proportions. No doubt that had come to him from seeing the *paysage intime* of Corot, Rousseau, and Daubigny. Possibly, too, he had been persuaded by the broad, simple landscapes of Georges Michel, whose pictures were then well known not only in Paris but in New York. At any rate it is quite apparent in Martin's work after 1876 that he was gradually discarding the "view" for something smaller and more intimate. It was still a mountain landscape known only to God and himself and had no human appeal, but it expressed Martin's thought and feeling much better than the earlier affair.

His brush, too, was broadening. It was beginning to sweep over details, spots, and sparkles, and to emphasize masses of light or dark or color. Exactness of statement, sharpness of line, emphasis of drawing were hindrances rather than helps to expression. Later on, no doubt, he would have agreed *in toto* with a re-

mark attributed by Charles Ricketts to Puvis de Chavannes: "*La perfection bête qui n'a rien à faire avec le vrai dessin, le dessin expressif!*" It was not until near the end of his career, when his eyesight had nearly gone, that Martin felt himself free from the restraint of method and materials. He then said to his wife in reply to some praise of a picture on the easel: "I have learned to paint at last. If I were quite blind now and knew just where the colors were on my palette I could express myself."

But long before he thought himself able to paint he had arrived with painters and paint-lovers. In 1877 he was asked in at the birth of the Society of American Artists, and was an initial member of that organization. The next year he went to Concord for *Scribners Monthly*\* to do some illustrations for an article on that place, and in 1881 he was sent to England by the *Century Magazine*† to prepare some illustrations of George Eliot's country. Martin did not altogether like making the illustrations and considered it as only hack-work. And it seems that the *Century* people did not particularly care for his work, though just why would be hard to discover. To the casual critic of to-day looking at these drawings in the magazine they seem excellent, and, moreover, they are decidedly Martinesque though worked over by an engraver.

\* *Scribners Monthly*, February, 1879.

† *Century Magazine*, vol. 30, 1885.

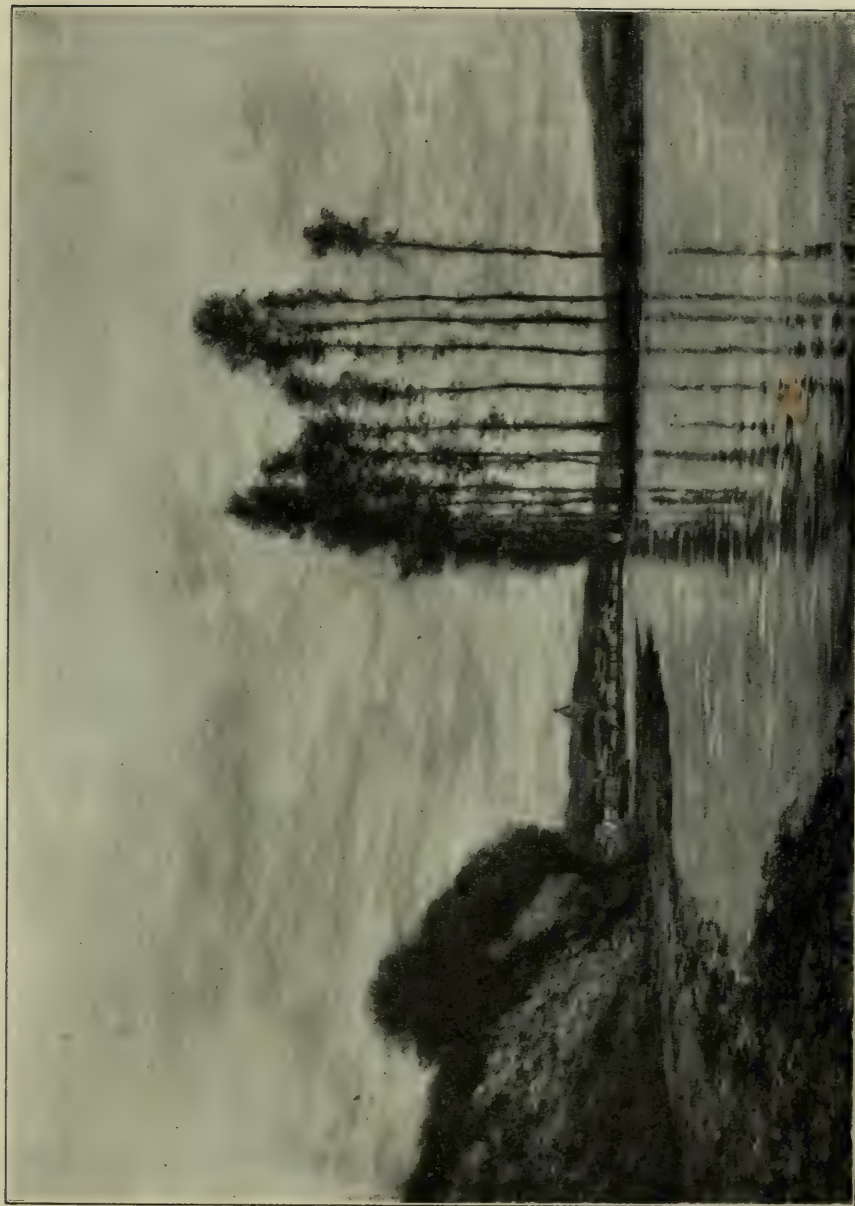
In London once more, the Martins saw much of Whistler and something of such literary people as Henley and the Gosses. After the illustrations were made they crossed over to France. It was planned to return soon to New York, but some unexpected money arrived and they stayed on at Villerville in Normandy. There and at Honfleur they remained until late in 1886. It was perhaps the most enjoyable period of their lives, for though they were poor in purse they were well-off in friends, and W. J. Henessey, Duez, Reinhart, the Forbes-Robertsons, the Brownells, and others came to see them. Life in Normandy was very attractive—perhaps too attractive for Martin's work, for he seems to have completed few pictures while there. It was another period of absorption during which he sketched and laid in many pictures which were afterward finished in America—such pictures as "Low Tide, Villerville," "Honfleur Light," "Criquebœuf Church," "Normandy Trees," "Normandy Farm," "Sun-Worshippers," and the "View on the Seine." He was not a painter to do a picture at one sitting. He required time and much musing before production.

Back once more in New York, Martin took a studio in Fifty-fifth Street, where he completed many of his Normandy canvases. After 1890 he had a painting-room in Fifty-ninth Street, where he did the "Haunted House" and the "Normandy Trees." In 1892 he made a last



trip to England, and spent some time at Bourne-mouth with George Chalmers. Returned again to America, he went to St. Paul to join Mrs. Martin, stopping on the way at the Chicago Fair, where a number of his pictures were shown. At St. Paul his eyesight began failing to an alarming degree. A famous oculist declared the optic nerve of one eye dead and the other eye clouded with cataract. But Martin now painted on with redoubled energy, as though conscious that his time was short. He finished a number of pictures and sent them on to New York, where he had a selling arrangement with a dealer. But alas! the pictures did not sell, and shortly afterward the painter laid aside his brushes. He was fatally ill with a malignant growth in the throat, and death came to him as something of a relief in 1897.

It was in these latter years only that Martin said that at last he had learned how to paint. Mrs. Martin had been lauding a picture called "The Adirondacks," saying that if he never did another stroke he would go out in a blaze of glory, and it was his answer to her. He probably meant by the remark that he had arrived at a method of handling that fully expressed his thought. In reality it was the same old method, only it had been broadened and simplified. Except in his very early works, Martin had never been given to excessive surface detail. He painted with a comparatively broad brush al-



**"View on the Seine," by Homer D. Martin.**

**In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.**





most from the start—painted with a flat stroke rather than with a stippling point. The “White Mountain” picture in the Metropolitan Museum, painted in 1868, shows substantially the same brush-work as the “Lake Ontario Sand Dunes” of nearly twenty years later. The sand-dunes picture seems to have been done largely with a palette-knife. Apparently it is trowelled across the canvas, with one tone or color laid over another, flattened down, compressed, blended. This applies especially to the sky; only the dead trees in the foreground are painted with a brush. In the “View on the Seine,” also in the Metropolitan Museum, the foliage and rocks are painted with the brush, but, again, the sky and water seem laid down in layers of paint, put on in long bands, and flattened to a lacquered surface. These bands of color in the sky, superimposed one upon another like platings of glass in a La Farge window, appear again in the “Honfleur Light.” All the hues seem blended by superimposition to produce a golden opalescent glow in the sky. Mrs. Martin said he used colors as a poet does words, and here, no doubt, he was getting orchestration in his sky by fusing many colors together.

But back of the method was the point of view which perhaps unconsciously begat the method. Martin always had a fancy for the great, the essential, elements of nature. And he saw things in their large relations, but at first was

bothered by their protrusive and petty facts. When finally he came to paint only what he loved and let the rest go, he arrived at full expression. To paint space, air, pervasive light, color—to paint these alone—was to emphasize them, to characterize them by isolation, as though the painter should say: “I mean you to look only at the things I love and you shall see that they are lovable. Never mind the bright autumn leaf, the woodchuck on the rock, or the open cottage door. Look at the glory of light coming through thin clouds, the great lift of the sky, the splendid reflection of the water, the abiding beauty of color in the forests and hills.”

It is doubtful that Martin had any positive theory of art which he was trying to work out in practice. He probably painted instinctively or unconsciously toward a given goal, as most painters do. That he knew emphasis could be given certain features of landscape by suppressing other features is to say that he knew the old law of dramatic effect. But there is a shade of difference perhaps between negative suppression and positive assertion. To emphasize a certain quality or element by putting forward its most commanding feature was to characterize it and make it dominant. And that, I think, was Martin's aim. He knew mountain light, air, and color as few painters have known them; he knew the glamour of their poetry quite as well as the prose of their facts. From much knowledge and

long contemplation he had come to know the abiding character of mountain landscape. And when at last he had simplified his composition and his handling, it seemed an easy matter for him to put the characterization upon canvas. His remark to Mrs. Martin, "If I were quite blind now and knew just where the colors were on my palette I could express myself," was not an empty boast.

This is perhaps reducing theories of painting to a very elementary basis. The formula prescribes merely an omission of what you do not care for and a strong characterization of the things you do care for. But as a matter of fact is that not the process common to most painters? The Meissoniers and Gérômes who paint the shoe-button and the eyelash do so because they love shoe-buttons and eyelashes just as Durand and Church loved birch bark and trailing ivy. Almost all of our early landscapists made no discrimination whatever in what they liked or disliked. A red sun in the background was of no more artistic importance than a red September maple in the foreground. They took nature in its entirety, omitting nothing, adding nothing. In result they produced something only a grade above the colored photograph. But Corot, Inness, Wyant, Martin had a more intelligent view-point. To them there were certain features of nature that were characteristic in their universality and permanence, and



other features that were merely casual or accidental. The introduction of the merely casual they found did not lend to the characterization of the permanent, so they discarded it and threw their strength into that which signified the most.

What are the significant and permanent features in landscape? Well, above all is light—the first of created things, and to this latest day the most beautiful of nature's manifestations. Corot spent his life painting it and even on his death-bed was raving about it in delirium. No wonder Martin was a great admirer of Corot, for he, too, was devoted to the splendor of light. In all of his later pictures it is a leading feature, and the eye is inevitably drawn at once to this beauty of the sky. He greatly disliked anything like a story in his landscapes or any literary climax dependent upon figures or houses or animals. They would detract from the tale of light and were discarded. Nature was beautiful enough by itself considered. No wonder he chose the uninhabited mountains for his subjects. They were not only devoid of humanity, but up there beyond the peaks was the most splendid manifestation of the light he loved—the pure mountain light.

What are the other abiding features of landscape? Well, shadow or half-light—light partially obscured by opaque bodies. It could be used as a contrast and by cunning application could be made to enhance the luminosity of

full light. Moreover, interior depth and penetration could be obtained with it. Best of all, its uncertainty lent itself to suggestiveness and the mystery of things half seen. Inness was greatly in love with it. Many of his late canvases are called "vague" or sometimes "swampy," because they are saturated with shadow masses out of which loom or glow mysteriously half-seen forms and colors. Martin made no such use of it as Inness, though many of his foregrounds are in shadow through which one looks to a lightened middle distance or sky. He was very fond of a light broken by being filtered through thin clouds, and he carried this out by employing a diffused thin shadow such as obtains under broken light. It is not often that one meets with dark shadows in his later pictures. He seemed to shy at anything like blackness, and in one of his pictures now in the Metropolitan Museum—the "View on the Seine"—the luminosity is so marked that the picture has the look of a water-color drawing. It was not the black and the "woolly" in Corot that he loved but the luminous and the radiant.

Another omnipresent and universal feature of landscape is color. It is an emanation of light, is, in fact, no more than its dispersed beams. If the light is direct and unclouded, the color will leap to very high pitches, such as we see in the landscapes of Inness or the Algerian scenes of Delacroix or Régnault or Fromentin; if the

light comes from below the horizon and is reflected down to earth from the upper sky, the color will be subdued in mellow tones of saffron, rose, and grays such as we see in the dawns of Corot; if the light comes from above the horizon at sunset and is filtered through filmy forms of cumulo-stratus clouds, the color will be delicate broken tones of gold, azure, sad grays such as we see in the "Honfleur Light" or the "Criquebœuf Church" of Martin. He revelled in these subdued tones of broken light. They were not only the eternal coloring of nature but they were the means wherewith he expressed his own sentiment or feeling about nature.

Still other and not less universal features of landscape to Martin were enveloping atmosphere which bound all things together and made harmony; space which lifted above the reach of the earth and was limitless; heave and bulge in the mountain ranges with continuity in their interblended lines and massive strength in their rock strata; a limitless expanse to the mountain forests; a splendid broken reflection from the surface of river, pond, and pool. These features appear in such different pictures as the "Lake Champlain," the "Lake Sandford," the "Adirondacks," the "Normandy Farm," the "Mussel Gatherers," the "Haunted House," the "Westchester Hills"—this last, perhaps, the simplest and the best of all.

A final characteristic of nature may be noted





**"Westchester Hills," by Homer D. Martin.**

**In the Daniel Guggenheim Collection.**



because Martin seems to have known it well. It appears in almost all of his pictures, and is perhaps more pronounced with him than with any other landscape-painter. I mean nature's great serenity. The word has been so carelessly used in criticism that one has difficulty in enforcing more than a careless meaning for it, and yet whatever of serenity there may be in fretful civilization or its art is merely a poor imitation of the eternal repose of nature itself. By that I imply nothing very profound. The mad plunges of Niagara, the explosions of Colima and Krakatoa, the inundation of tidal waves, or the shakings of earthquakes are mere accidents from which nature straightway recovers. The winds, the storms, the great sea-waves again are only momentary incidents. After they have passed, nature once more returns to herself. She is ruffled merely for a moment and then only in a small localized area. Her normal condition is repose—that immobility which we associate with the realms of space.

In the arts some attempt has been made to give this quality of supreme restfulness. The early Egyptians in their colossal Pharaonic statues attained a formal repose by the bulk and weight and hardness of the granite and the calm attitude of the figure seated in its great stone chair. The Parthenon as a building and the Phidian sculptures of the pediment, now in the British Museum, again have a poise and style not inaptly called restful. Once more in painting serenity has often been attributed to the land-



scapes of Claude and Corot and not without good reason. Martin liked that feature in both these landscape-painters. Standing before the paralleled and contrasted Claude and Turner in the National Gallery, he called George Chalmers's attention to the serene dignity of the Claude and the fussiness and labored work of the Turner. But before ever he saw Turner or Claude or Corot, he was picturing this attribute of nature with marked effect. His critics and admirers called attention to the absence of anything dramatic in his art; they noticed that his landscapes were deserted of man, that they were silent, forsaken places with a solemn stillness about them. Nothing stirred in them; God and Martin only had seen them. But was not all this merely another way of describing nature's eternal repose which Martin had grasped and pictured?

There is no stillness like that of a deserted church or a haunted house, and are not all Martin's churches deserted and all his houses haunted? There is no hush like that of a mountain forest, and are not all his forests motionless? There is no rest like that of a mountain lake caught in a cup in the hills, and are not all Martin's lakes still waters that throw back the reflection of serene skies? We speak of his poetry, of his sentiment and his feeling about nature, and these he had in abundance, but do we always credit him with a knowledge of na-

ture's profundities? Had he not an intellectual grasp of the great elemental truths of nature, and was his art not largely a calm, supreme, and splendid exposition of those truths to mankind? A seer and a poet he was; but also a thinker. His long fallow periods when he did not, could not, paint were periods of intellectual reflection that brought forth after their kind an art which was at least unique.

Martin's pictures never were very popular. During his life the great public passed them by and the picture-collector bought them only with caution and at very modest prices. It was to be supposed that after bravely living and dying in poverty his pictures would finally come into the market and sell at factitious prices. Such indeed has been the case. Some of them shortly after his death fetched over five thousand dollars apiece, and to meet an increased demand for them the genial forger came to the rescue. Spurious Martins were made and sold to picture-collectors until finally the scandal of it had an airing in open court.

What a commentary on an age and a people that would appreciate and patronize art! The real jewel lying unnoticed in the dust for years and then a quarrel in court over its paste imitation! Verily the annals of art furnish forth strange reading, and not the least remarkable page is the story of Homer Martin and his pictures.





V

WINSLOW HOMER



## V

### WINSLOW HOMER

I NEVER had more than a nodding acquaintance with Winslow Homer. Several times at opening nights of the National Academy of Design or elsewhere, there was a word of greeting or comment but no more. He sent me, in 1893 or thereabouts, a signed copy of a reproduction of his "Undertow," and letters were exchanged about it; but nothing noteworthy was in the letters. My impression about him, if I had one, was perhaps not different from that of his contemporaries. He was always thought a diffident, a taciturn, even at times a brusque, person—one who preferred his own silence to any one else's loquacity. Chase once remarked that he would thank no one for entertainment because he liked his own art better than any one's society, but that was mere scorn he was just then flinging out at a Philistine millionaire. The remark would fit Homer much better. For Homer lived it and Chase did not.

Much of Homer's brusqueness of manner found its way into his art. There is no grace or charm or polish about it. The manner of it repels rather than wins one. The cunning, the adroit, the insinuating are hardly ever apparent, but in their



place we have again and again the direct, the abrupt, the vehement. He states things without prelude or apology in a harsh, almost savage, manner, and the chief reason why we listen to him is that he has something to say. He has seen things in nature at first hand and his statement about them brings home fundamental truths to us with startling force. There is no sentiment or feeling in or about the report. The man never falls into a revery as Martin, or a mood as Wyant, or a passion as Inness. He is merely a reporter and is concerned only with the truth. But it is a very compelling truth that he shows us.

He came out of Boston, where in 1836 he was born of New England parents. His father was a hardware merchant and his mother a Maine woman who is said to have had a talent for painting flowers. The inference has been that the son got his first fancy for painting from his mother, though one can hardly imagine anything farther removed from Homer's liking than the anæmic flower-painting of New England ladies in the 1840's. On the other hand, his grandfathers had been seafaring men and it is quite possible that he inherited from them that love for the sea that developed in his later life. But then it is difficult to make out that Homer derived anything from any one. He seems to have just grown rather than developed from a stalk or stock.

When he was six his family moved to Cambridge; and thereabouts, in the woods and streams, he hunted, fished, and developed a love for out-of-door life that never left him. There, too, he went to school and put forth his first drawings. There is a drawing extant, done when he was eleven years old, called the "Beetle and the Wedge" \*—a drawing of boys at play—that Kenyon Cox praises highly, saying that "the essential Winslow Homer, the master of weight and movement, is already here by implication." It is certainly a remarkable drawing, for it shows not only observation but skill of hand beyond a boy of eleven. Moreover, one is rather surprised at the economy of means employed. It is done easily, with a few strokes, as though the boy-artist had unusual knowledge of form.

The father was evidently pleased with the son's after-efforts, for at nineteen the youth was apprenticed to a Boston lithographer by the name of Bufford. He started at work without any lessons in drawing and was soon making designs for title-pages of sheet-music and working somewhat upon figures. A wood-engraver named Damereau gave him some hints about drawing on the block, and in the two years that he remained with Bufford he must have picked up much information about drawing for illustration, for at twenty-one he had

\* Published in Downes, *Life and Works of Winslow Homer*, Boston, 1911.

set up a shop of his own and was making illustrations for *Ballou's Pictorial*, *Harper's Weekly*, and other periodicals.

The experience as an illustrator no doubt taught him exact observation, precision in outline drawing, conciseness in statement, and the value of the essential feature. So impressive was this early education that it remained with him and influenced him to the end. He was always an observer and an illustrator. One of his canvases left unfinished at his death, "Shooting the Rapids," now in the Metropolitan Museum, is primarily an illustration of Adirondack life. It is something more, to be sure, but the point to be noted just here is that the early inclination was never wholly changed. He never became subjective, never intentionally put himself into any of his works. He merely reported what he saw from the point of view of an illustrator.

He came to New York to live in 1859 and attended the night classes at the Academy of Design. There he no doubt improved his drawing. It is said that he also received instruction from Rondel, a Frenchman, and in the Paris Exposition of 1890 he was catalogued as a "pupil of Rondel"; but there must have been some jest behind it, for Homer received only four lessons from Rondel. He was not the man to take lessons from any one. From the beginning he was too self-reliant, too self-centred, to be led very far afield by another's method or opinion.



In 1860, while still a very young man, he exhibited at the Academy of Design his picture called "Skating in Central Park." The next year he went to Washington to prepare drawings for Lincoln's inauguration; and the year following he was the special war-artist of *Harper's Weekly* with McClellan in the Peninsular Campaign. His first war-picture done in oils is said to be a "Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty." It was soon followed by "Rations," "Home, Sweet Home," and "The Lost Goose"—two of them shown at the Academy of Design in 1863. The next year he sent "The Briarwood Pipe" and "In Front of the Guard House." In 1865 he was made an academician for his picture called "The Bright Side," and shortly afterward his very popular painting "Prisoners from the Front" was shown.

There is nothing remarkable about any of these works. "The Bright Side," which won Homer the title of N.A., shows some negro soldiers sprawling on the sunny side of an army tent. Like "Rations" and "Prisoners from the Front," it is just a passable illustration that if made to-day would run small risk of applause. We wonder over the achievement of Homer's later years, but one is not sure that the lack of achievement in his earlier years is not the more surprising. How could he do such commonplace little pictures! Occasionally something like "Snap the Whip," which has large drawing

comes in to break the monotony; but the dull trend is soon resumed. His audiences and editors must have been decidedly uncritical or else extremely good-natured.

And at this time Homer had practically finished with his apprenticeship to art. He was thirty years old and had already developed aloofness, not to say taciturnity. He kept much by himself, would not look at other people's pictures or discuss them, would not take advice from any one. This was not because his head had been turned by his popularity; but possibly because he thought he could work out better results alone than with the aid of others. In spite of a little noisy success, he must have known that his paintings up to this time were of small importance. They were hard in drawing, brick-like in color, cramped in handling. Their illustrative quality and the fact that Homer did them are the only interesting things about them to-day.

In 1867 he went to France and spent ten months in Paris, but what he did there can only be guessed at. He evidently attended no schools, haunted no galleries, made no friends among painters. He did some drawings of people copying in the Louvre and dancing in the Students Quarter—that is about all. The inclination of the illustrator was with him rather than the prying instincts of an art student. What cared he about Titian's nobles or Watteau's gallants or Chardin's cooks! They were not themes for him to

conjure with. What to him was the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* or the *atelier* of Couture! He was well past the student age. He might have thought highly of the works of Millet or Courbet had he studied them, but there is no hint in his work that he had even seen them, though John La Farge said that Homer was largely made by studying the lithographs of the men of 1830.

He came back to America and continued painting American subjects in his own hard, dry, and hot manner. He did some shore themes at Gloucester showing a first interest in the sea, some pictures of girls picking berries or grouped in a country store, some sketches of boys swimming, and men in the hay-fields—all of them showing an interest in country life. But none of them was in any way remarkable. His "Sand Swallow Colony," with boys robbing the nests under the bank's edge, is the best type of his illustrations done at this time. It appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, served its purpose, and went its way without making any perceptible impression upon American art.

In 1874 Homer made a first trip to the Adirondacks, as though searching new magazine material. He found it in the Adirondack guides and in hunting-scenes. In 1876 he went to Virginia, once more looking for painter's "copy," and finding it in the American negro. Such pictures as "The Carnival" and a "Visit from the Old Mistress" were the result. It was a *genre* inter-



esting only in theme, for Homer's workmanship was still without any great merit or impressiveness. He flung back to the American farmer for a subject, and then once more went to Gloucester to do schooners and ships. In 1873, while staying on Ten Point Island, in Gloucester Harbor, he had drawn some water-colors notable for their high light and their absence of shadow. They seemed to have some purely pictorial quality about them, but the illustrative motive was still behind them. He did not give up work for *Harper's Weekly* until 1875, and it was 1880 before he finally abandoned all work for reproduction.

Up to this time Homer had not painted a single epoch-making picture. As Kenyon Cox quite truly says, had he died at forty he would have been unknown to fame. One might draw out the number of years and make them fifty without extravagance of statement. Indeed, it was not until he was sixty that he began to paint his pictures of barren coast and sea upon which his enduring fame must rest, though before that he had given indication in many pictures of fisher-folk, whither he was trending. The blood of his sailor ancestors was coming to the fore at last, and the sea was to be his main theme thereafter. If we believe in genius that is born rather than made, then that, too, began to crop out in his later life.

He went to Tynemouth, England, in 1881, and

stayed there for two years in close contact with the fisher people of the coast. This produced a decided change in his art. The large, robust type of English fisher lass, the strongly built sailor in oilskins, appealed to him and remained with him. They were rugged, forceful people that well met his hard drawing and severe brush. There, too, he began picturing the gray sky and mist and sea of England. The heavy atmosphere that hangs like a pall upon the North Sea in stormy weather caught his fancy, and the gray-blue, gray-green waters gave him a new idea of color. The old airless, brick-colored picture of his early days was never taken up again. He dropped readily into cool grays, which in themselves were perhaps no nearer a fine color-harmony than his earlier hot colors, but at the least they were neutral and they were emphatically true of the sea in its stormy phases.

Even Homer's rigid method of painting began to break a little at Tynemouth. He was working then in water-colors, and perhaps the lighter medium lent itself more readily to a freer handling. His brush loosened, his drawing seemed less angular, less emphasized in outline, and his composition became more a matter of selection and adjustment than of mere accidental appearance.

Mr. Cox, whose excellent monograph on Homer I am glad to quote,\* thinks that Homer quite

\* *Winslow Homer : An Appreciation*, by Kenyon Cox, New York, 1914.

found himself at Tynemouth, and points out in the "Voice from the Cliff" his "rhythm of line" whereby he holds the three figures together; but I am not sure that Homer did not get a suggestion of that rhythm of line up in London town on his perhaps occasional visits there. A hint of the types of the fisher girls, the repeated lines of the arms and dresses, with the strength gotten from the repetition, I seem to remember in Leighton's picture called the "Summer Moon." Albert Moore, too, was turning out rhythmical repetitions at that time and using models that remind us somewhat of those used by Homer, though, of course, slighter and more fanciful. The fisher girls in the "Voice from the Cliff" and the "Three Girls" are a little too pretty to be wholly original with Homer, and yet it must be acknowledged that such water-colors as "Mending the Nets" and "Watching the Tempest" give warning of the coming man. The two women seated on a bench in the "Mending the Nets" are young-faced, large-boned, big-bodied types that have a sculpturesque quality about them; and the "Watching the Tempest" throws out a suggestion of the Homeric sea that is to be.

It was in 1884 that Homer finally went to Prout's Neck, near Scarborough, where he built a cottage on the shore and lived for the rest of his life, quite alone, practically shut out from art and artists, a recluse and a hermit yet



within gunshot of a crowd. He lived there much as Thoreau at Walden Pond, cooking his own meals, doing his own gardening, raising his own tobacco, and rolling his own cigars. The city had never been attractive to him, and from first to last he preferred picturing the open spaces rather than streets and houses.

It was from the isolation of Prout's Neck that he began sending forth the pictures that made him famous. One of the earliest was the "Life Line" of 1884. It is a most dramatic illustration of a rescue at sea—a girl being brought ashore by a life-saving-station man. The two are swung in a buoy from the taut life-line and are being windlassed through the great waves. The girl is unconscious, and, lying helpless, catches the eye and the sympathy at once. That our interest in her might be all-absorbing, the painter has hidden the man's face by a woollen muffler blown out by the wind.

Now the "Life Line" is very forceful story-telling with the brush, but let it not be overlooked that it is story-telling—illustration. The illustrator, with an eye for the critical moment and the appealing interest, is just as apparent here as in "Snap the Whip" or "Prisoners from the Front." Winslow Homer, the pictorial reporter, is still present. All along he has been answering the question: "What does it mean?" He is still interested in that, but he is now beginning to think about the artist's question:

“How does it look?” He is just a little concerned about his form and his color, his composition, and his general pictorial effect. They are not what they should be. The wet, clinging garments of the girl reveal a large and very hard figure. It is rigid in its outlines and stony in its texture, as though reinforced for purposes of mechanical reproduction. The man is little more than so much tackle and line, so ropelike is his treatment, and the enormous hollow of the sea is merely a perilous background. As for color, the picture is gray and would lose none of its fetching quality if done in black-and-white. There is no love for color as color nor for painting as painting here. The handling was evidently as little pleasure to the painter as it is to us. It is as flat, as monotonous, and as negative as the plaster on a kitchen wall. There is no suspicion of subtlety, facility, or suavity in it. But when all that is said, there is a large something left behind unaccounted for—a grip and knowledge and point of view—that we respect and admire.

A second dramatic and harrowing picture finished at Prout's Neck was “Undertow.” It is a rescue of two girl bathers by life-savers, something that the painter had seen in the surf at Atlantic City. It appealed to him. Why? Because it was beautiful in itself? Hardly that; but because it had great illustrative possibilities. There once more was the critical



“Undertow,” by Winslow Homer.  
In the Edward D. Adams Collection.





moment and the appealing interest. He could not resist such "copy" as that. But now in putting the picture together he is something more than a reporter of the fact. He embellishes the fact to make it not only more effective but more attractive. He places the figures on the canvas in a diagonal line that echoes the diagonal of the incoming wave at the back. The lines give a swing and surge forward not only to the sea but to the figures. The four figures are locked in a long chain—almost a death-grip—with clutching hands and arms and much use of angle lines. The angle lines repeat one another, interlock, and run on until the whole group is of a piece—moves as a piece. All this, of course, helps on the literary but it also indicates a growing sense of the pictorial. The four figures begin to have the monumental quality of a Greek pedimental group. The very sharpness of their drawing and the hardness of their texture seem to help out the plastic feeling. Homer seems rising to the difference between the merely illustrative and the picturesque in design; but his color sense stirs only sluggishly. The "Undertow" is pitched in neutral grays and greens, and one cannot rave over it.

At this time the painter was spending his winter months not on the Maine coast but down in the Bahamas or Cuba or Bermuda. While in those places he did a great many water-colors—glimpses of palm and sand and sea with white

houses glaring in the sun. They were done with much freedom, with a sense of blinding light, and some realization of color. The quality of mere "copy" drops out of them, or perhaps was never in them. They seem scraps of pictures, delightful glimpses of such pictorial features as sun and shade and bright hues. It looks from them as though Homer would finally emerge as a great painter and forget his early point of view. And at times he does. But he has lapses, and the bias of his early days returns to him.

From his Southern trips came the material for "The Gulf Stream" done about 1886. Once more the painter has grasped the psychological moment. A shipwrecked, starving negro is lying on the deck of a dismasted schooner drifting in the Gulf Stream. In the shadowed water of the foreground sharks are playing, beyond the boat are whitecaps and running seas, in the distance is the suggestion of a waterspout under a blue-gray sky. There is quite a display of color. It is in the sea and sky, but its breadth is somewhat disturbed by being flecked with white in patches. The picture is spotty in the foam and the clouds, and does not sum up as a complete harmony. It seems as though color were not an integral part of it but something brought in as an afterthought—color added to design rather than design in color.

This is not the case, however, with the very beautiful "Herring Net," done at about the





**"Marine," by Winslow Homer.**  
In the Emerson McMillin Collection.



same time. It is another open-sea piece with fishermen drawing into a boat a net full of wriggling fish caught in the meshes. Herring, as they come out of the water, are brilliant in iridescent hues, and no doubt that in itself appealed to Homer and was the reason for the picture's existence. The color at once became the illustrative motive—became the picture. There is no feeling now of color as an after-thought or as playing second part to the men or the sea. The eye goes to the glittering herring at once. You comprehend at a glance that this is a color scheme *per se*, and that the gray men and the gray sea are only a ground upon which the iridescent hues appear. Whether Homer realized how beautiful the color was, whether he had any emotional feeling about it, or saw any fine pictorial poetry in it, who shall say? In life he was disposed to deny such things. He said to John W. Beatty: "When I have selected a thing carefully, I paint it exactly as it appears." Was that his procedure with the "Herring Net"? Was it merely a color report of what he had seen? If so, he never saw anything so beautiful again. It is his high-water mark as a colorist.

Homer was now producing his best-known pictures of fishermen, sailors, and sea, such as the "Fog Warning" and "Eight Bells." A literary half-illustrative quality marks them, but perhaps we should not feel this did we not know the painter had served time at that side of art.



They can stand as great pictures all by themselves, simply because they are powerful characterizations of the sea. They have a driving truth about them that sweeps away any demurrer on account of their method. And in them all there is indication and suggestion of an expanding pictorial sense. It came late, for Homer was fifty. It was never to become a complete expansion, it was always more of a suggestion than a realization; but it was a welcome addition and showed the painter's active and receptive mind.

While in Cuba Homer got the material for his "Searchlight, Santiago Harbor," which he put in picture form about 1899. There is a great dark gun in the foreground—the dramatic catch-point, again—with a suggestion of a mason-work fort around it. A search-light flares up the sky; the sky itself is a gray-blue night effect. The arrangement is large, big in simplicity of masses. The color is the usual gray-blue, but there is a fine note about it, with a light and an air that would count for little in reproduction but are very effective in the picture itself. The canvas comes precious near being a great affair of form, light, and air. It is as sharp in drawing and as flat and dull in its surface painting as his other works. The naïve simplicity of the brush-work is astonishing. Homer knows no tricks of handling, and will resort to no glazes, scumbles, or stipples. He makes his statement so unadorned that it seems almost crude or

immature. And yet with these shortcomings we still have an unusual quality of light, a rare night sky, and a suggestion, at least, of fine color.

If the artistic sense seemed to be growing with Homer in his late years, the early illustrative sense was not exactly dead or dying. From first to last he knew how to characterize things—to catch and give the salient features with force. Nothing he ever did shows this better than his “Fox and Crows,” now in the Pennsylvania Academy. A red fox is trailing through soft, deep snow and some crows are hawking and dipping at him, as is their wont. Off in the distance is a glimpse of the sea under a gray sky. It is composition, characterization, and illustration all in one. Nothing could be more original or more truthful. From this picture alone one might think Homer an experienced animal painter, but it happens to be his one and only animal picture. It is practically an arrangement in black-and-white, well massed and effectively placed on the canvas. The blacks of the near crows are repeated in the far crows and in the ears and forepaws of the fox; the white of the snow is repeated in the sea and sky; the gray half-tones are echoed in the fox and rocks and clouds. It is not only an excellent design fully wrought but the effect of the skill is apparent in the convincing truth of fox and snow and winter shore.

Finally came a series of pictures in which

bird and beast and man are left out and only the great sea and its fearsome fret on the shore remain. "Cannon Rock," done about 1895, shows a section of rocky coast with blue-green waves pushing in and curling in white crests. In the "Northeaster" a green-and-white wave is breaking over a rock and the spray and foam are flung high in air. The "Maine Coast" is a wild day along shore with rain and mist and spindrift and flying scud in the air; there is blue-gray sky and sea, and far out the huge waves are lifting and rolling shoreward with irresistible force. On the rocky coast the foaming crests are falling amid split and shattered rock strata. "High Cliff" and the "Great Gale" are variations of the same theme.

Of course these pictures are illustrative in a way of the Maine coast, but one does not think of them as such but rather as descriptive or creative. They are reports of the power of the sea, wonderful view-points of a great element. In that sense they are epic, tremendous characterizations, all-powerful statements that startle and command. You cannot get away from them. They fascinate, and yet are not attractive in the sense that you would like to have one of them in your drawing-room. They are elemental rather than ornamental. As Kenyon Cox well puts it, you might as well let the sea itself into your house as one of Homer's sea-pictures. The picture would sweep everything before it,





**“Fox and Crows,” by Winslow Homer.**

**From a copyrighted photograph of the painting, reproduced by courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.**



put everything else out of key, make a black spot on the wall, and continually irritate you with its harshness of method. From his youth upward Homer seems to have had a scorn for the decorative. Charm either in his personality or his art seems to have been a gift withheld by the fairy godmother. He had the giant's strength and with it he had to accept the limitations of that endowment. The gentler side of the sea—the flat summer plains of glorious color and light—he did not care for, and even such features of the stormy sea as the flashing, foaming crests he could not do except in hard, immovable form. The crests in the "Woods Island Light" look like inlays of white marble on lapis lazuli. The bubbling surge full of color and evanescent as champagne was too charming, too lovely for him.

There were returns to the illustrative during his later years in such pictures as "The Wreck," "Kissing the Moon," and in Adirondack scenes, but by 1900 he had reached his apogee and thereafter changed little. He was not to break out any new sails. Nor was there need of it. His great ability and originality had been abundantly displayed and universally recognized by both painter and public. Honors, enough and to spare, were his. In 1893, at Chicago, he had been awarded the gold medal, and everything that art societies could do or artists and critics could say had been done and said. Up at Prout's



Neck, where he had shut the door after him and kept it closed for so many years, these echoes of the world's recognition were received with indifference. Miss Mechlin quotes from a letter of his in 1907:

"Perhaps you think I am still painting and interested in art. That is a mistake. I care nothing for art. I no longer paint. I do not wish to see my name in print again."

He wrote that perhaps on one of his bad days, for he did take up the brush again, but with no great spirit or effectiveness. In 1908 he was seriously ill and quite helpless, but he insisted upon living on in his lonely house with entrance forbidden to all but his brother's family. And there quite by himself he died in September, 1910. He had lived a strange life, produced a strong art, and then died, like a wolf, in silence.

One often wonders regarding such a character as Winslow Homer what would have been the result if the strange in both his life and his art had been eliminated. Would it have helped matters or would his strength have been dissipated thereby? And wherein lay the strangeness of Homer if not that he never inherited a single social or artistic tradition nor would adopt one in later life? He made his own manners and his own methods, in life as in art, with the result that in both he was always a rough diamond. He never received anything of importance by teaching or training. Culture of mind and hand, emotional feeling or romance, were practically

unknown to him. He was as far removed from romanticism as classicism, and cared nothing about any of the isms of art. We keep flinging back to an early conclusion that he was a wonderful reporter rather than an interpreter, a reporter who saw unusual things in the first place and reported them with unusual characterization in the second place. The result was about the largest nature truths of our day. Truth was his avowed aim—the plain unvarnished truth. He never intentionally departed from it.

Homer is an excellent illustration of what a man cannot do entirely by himself. With his initial force and his keen vision he could make a very powerful report. Had he been educated, taught restraint and method, given a sense of style, schooled in decorative value, he might have risen to the great gods of art. But perhaps not. Even pedagogues, in their late years, begin to doubt the worth of training. It might have ruined Winslow Homer. Yet, nevertheless, it is the thing that his admirers always feel the lack of in his pictures. He has no comeliness of style, no charm of statement, no grace of presentation. To the last he is a barbarian for all that we may feel beneath his brush

“ the surge and thunder of the ‘Odyssey.’ ”

Unfortunately, much of Homer's barbarism of the brush lives after him while his splendid vision

and stubborn character are in danger of being interred with his bones. He himself has become a tradition, a master to be imitated, for though he founded no school and had no pupils, a great many young painters in America have been influenced by his pictures. The majority of these young men have concluded that Homer's strength lay in the rawness and savagery of his method; they have not gripped the fact that his compelling force was a matter of mind rather than of hand. An imitator can always be counted upon to clutch at a mannerism and neglect a mentality. So it is that many a young art student of to-day, with just enough imagination to conjure up an apple-blossom landscape is painting with the crude color and gritty brush of Homer, thinking thereby to get something "strong."

What a dreadful mistake! A surly surface of heaped-up paint *minus* the drawing that is Homer! And the juvenile error of supposing that the knowledge of a lifetime can be picked up and handed out by a glib imitator in the few hours of a summer afternoon! The attempt presupposes art to be merely a conjurer's trick—a supposition that history does not sustain.

Homer cannot be counted fortunate in his followers. Accepting a surface appearance of strength as the all-in-all of art, they have abandoned grace of form with charm of color—flung the decorative to the winds. We are now asked to admire this or that because it is "real" or



“just as I saw it,” or “absolutely true”—as though such apologies in themselves were sufficient reasons for fine art. But Homer long before he died withdrew to Prout’s Neck and abandoned his fellows of the brush. He no doubt thought them quite hopeless. Perhaps there was reason behind his thinking.

Of course he cannot be held responsible for their paint pretenses. His rank as a painter will be made up from his own works. By them he will be judged and they will surely stand critical estimate. For nothing more virile, more positive, more wholesome has ever been turned out in American art. He had something to say worth listening to. And he said it about our things and in our way. No one will question for an instant the Americanism of his art. The very rudeness of it proclaims its place of origin. Reflecting a civilization as yet quite new to art, a people as yet very close to the soil, what truer tale has been told! The fortitude of the pioneer, with the tang of the unbroken forest and the unbeaten sea are in it.

Homer was not the Leonardo but the Mantegna of American art. He came too early for perfect expression, but, like many of the rude forefathers, he had the fine virtue of sincerity. You cannot help but admire his frankness, his honesty, even his brutality. There is no pretense about him; he makes no apology, offers no preface or explanation. He presents a point of view,

and in the very brusqueness of his presentation seems to say: "Take it or let it alone." He must have known his expression was incomplete. Did he realize that art was too long and life too short to round the whole circle? The majority of painters move over only a small segment of the span. At sixty, Homer had no more than found his theme. It would have taken another lifetime to have given him style and method. And even then, grace of accomplishment might have weakened force of conception. He had his errors, but perhaps they emphasized his fundamental truths. So perhaps we should be thankful that he was just what he was—a great American painter who was sufficient unto himself in both thought and expression.

VI

JOHN LA FARGE





## VI

### JOHN LA FARGE

LA FARGE is an exceptional man in American painting—the exception that will perhaps prove the value of tradition and education in the craft. More than any other in our history he was born to art. He did not live through a barefoot stage on a farm and then by chance come to a speaking acquaintance with painting at twenty or thereabouts; he could not boast of a struggle against adverse circumstances in an uncongenial environment. On the contrary, he was rather luxuriously raised in a city, and as a child found art in the family circle and a part of the family life. He had begun to see, hear, and think about it at six years of age. At thirty, when he definitely decided to accept painting as a vocation, he knew the tale quite well, was highly endowed intellectually, and had the insight and the imagination to see things in significant aspects. What wonder that he made an impression and left a body of work that voiced authority! He himself became a master, caught up the torch and carried on the light, spreading it and diffusing it in this new world. He was an inheritor and transmitter of art as well as a creator of it.

By that I do not mean that La Farge was raised in a studio and trained in hand and eye like a Florentine apprentice, but rather that his family, with its collateral branches, was made up of highly educated dilettanti, and art as a theme was ever up with them for discussion and appreciation. He grasped it historically and æsthetically long before he took it up professionally. The practical processes were taught him, to some extent, even as a child; but the philosophy came first and remained with him to the last. It was the French philosophy of taste—the best of the time—and La Farge himself was French save for the accident of his birth here in New York. It was the tradition of Delacroix that he finally accepted and transplanted here in American soil, adding to it, of course, his own profound thought and fine feeling. “He prided himself on faithfulness to tradition and convention,” according to his long-time friend Henry Adams.

The story of his birth and education reads somewhat romantically to-day, though it was only yesterday that he was here. His father as a young man was an officer in the French navy and had been sent to Santo Domingo, during an uprising there, to seize Toussaint the revolutionist. The enterprise went against him, but he escaped the general massacre that followed and eventually found himself a refugee in the United States. He did not return to France, but instead went into sugar-growing in Loui-



siana, acquired property in New York, and married there a daughter of M. Binsse de St. Victor, a Santo Domingo sugar-planter, who, like himself, had been driven from the island by the uprising under Toussaint. These French refugees were La Farge's parents and he, himself, was born in Beach Street, near St. John's Church, in 1835. The house was in what has latterly been called old New York and La Farge never entirely got out of that quarter. During his life he did not live above Tenth Street.

His parents were very cultivated people and as a boy La Farge's education was precisely guided. His father was a rather severe type and instilled rugged principles. He was a good teacher, and the pupil was brought up to do exact thinking. In his reading he was not permitted to roam at large. He tells us in his letters and communications to Mr. Cortissoz, whose admirable account I am paraphrasing,\* that as a child he read French and English, read St. Pierre, Rousseau, Bossuet, Homer, De Foe, Voltaire—certainly an odd lot of authors for childish consumption. The house was full of books—Molière, Racine, Corneille, Cervantes, Byron—some of them illustrated with handsome Turner-esque engravings, which no doubt had quite as much influence on the boy as the printed texts. The outlook of his parents was

\* *John La Farge: A Memoir and a Study*, by Royal Cortissoz, Boston, 1911.

large and La Farge grew up in an atmosphere of liberal ideas.

As for the house, he speaks of it as being "really very elegant" and regarding the pictures on the walls, he says:

"The influences which I felt as a little boy were those of the paintings and the works of art that surrounded me at home." There were examples in the house of Vernet, Le Moyne, Salvatore Rosa, Sebastiano del Piombo, many Dutch pictures, particularly "a beautiful Salomon Rysdael." "It so happened that my very first teachings were those of the eighteenth century and my training has covered almost a century and a half."

At six he had wished to draw and paint, and was handed over to his maternal grandfather to be taught. The grandfather had been ruined by his Santo Domingo losses, and in his age had no other resource than to fall back upon the polite learning he had acquired in his youth. He took up miniature painting and gave drawing lessons because, as La Farge explained it, "it was in the family."

"On a small scale he was an exquisite painter. He was also a good teacher and started me at six years old in the traditions of the eighteenth century. . . . The teaching was as mechanical as it could be and was rightly based upon the notion that a boy ought to be taught so as to know his trade. There was not the slightest alleviation and no suggestion of this being 'art.'"

He was taught to sharpen crayons, to fasten paper, to draw parallel lines, and produce a tint. Gradually he came to copy such things as engravings. The work became more interesting, and at eight he could do something that had resemblance to an original. Later he copied everything that came to hand and was free to do as he pleased.

In the meantime his general education was not neglected. His grandmother Binsse de St. Victor had opened a school for young ladies which was very successful. La Farge as a boy took lessons under her, and in his reminiscences recalls the severity of his drilling in eighteenth-century French. He got English from an English governess, and some German from an Alsatian nurse. Then came books and school and the dreariness of lessons on dry themes. He was sent to Columbia Grammar School, passed into Columbia College, changed over to Fordham, and finally, in 1853, graduated at Mount St. Mary's in Maryland.

He recalls that during his school-days there was much reading of history, literature, and archæology. In English his professor led him to read Newman and Ruskin—the two great masters of style, though the one was classic and the other romantic. In French there was De Musset, Balzac, Heine. He was familiar with Greek and Latin—he could not have graduated from a Catholic college without knowing Latin—and had early gone over the classical writers



in the original languages. As for art, he studied engravings of Dürer and lithographs of the old masters. "An English water-color painter had been found who gave me thoroughly English lessons." After college days he got lessons from a French artist. In later life, looking at his drawings made in the early fifties, he thought them "respectable." "They were largely based on line and construction, which of course gives a basis of seriousness."

After graduation he entered a lawyer's office and began studying law, though he still held his interest in art. Some pictures of the men of 1830 were beginning to come into the country and he recalls buying for a few dollars a Diaz, a Troyon, and a Bargue, and his delight in them. He met artists like Inness, talked art and thought much about it, but he was not yet prepared to embrace it for better or worse. In 1856, when he was twenty-one, he went to Europe, not minded even then to study art professionally, but merely wishing travel for travel's sake and to be for a time a looker-on.

He went directly to Paris and joined his cousin, Paul Binsse (or Bins), Comte de St. Victor, who was just then holding prominent place in literary and journalistic Paris. The cousin was writing in a brilliant style dramatic, literary, and art criticism for *Le Pays*, *La Presse*, and *La Liberté*, and publishing books such as *Hommes et Dieux*, *Barbares et Bandits*, *Les Dieux et les*

*Demi-Dieux de la peinture.* He was in association with the Goncourts, Sainte-Beuve, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo, Flaubert—all the great gods of little Paris. The father, Jacques Benjamin Maximilien Binsse, Comte de St. Victor, had had a literary and artistic vogue before the son. He had been the editor of *La France* and the *Journal des Débats*, had written for the stage and the opera, and was the author of numerous books of poetry, archæology, and history. He was still alive and flourishing when La Farge reached Paris, and his house was open to the young man from America. It was the house of a collector of paintings; the most famous artists and literary men met there; there was much comment and criticism in the air—much roaring of the lions. La Farge was in the midst of it. As he expressed it: “Art and literature were there at my hand, in rather an ancient form, but with the charm of the past, the eighteenth century, and the wonderful beginning of the nineteenth.”

The great uncle was in sympathy with the classic and the academic, stood up for David and Guérin, and looked askance at everything new; but the cousin, Paul de St. Victor, was the champion of the younger men. La Farge was between two fires in the home and listened to both sides when he went abroad. He met Gérôme, then a young man, frequented the house of Chasseriau, heard much of the con-

troversy between Ingres and Delacroix. He never met Delacroix, but was profoundly impressed by his works. He was also much impressed at this early time by the glass in the Paris churches, and during a trip to Brussels met Henry Le Strange, who had decorated Ely Cathedral, and through him became interested in methods of mural painting.

The father in America thought that his son was wasting his time and wrote him urging that he take up art seriously. The result was that La Farge went to Couture's studio and had a talk with the master. He did not even then think of art as a profession, and wanted from Couture not so much technical education as general education in art. He spent only two weeks in the studio and then set about copying the drawings of the old masters in the Louvre. Presently he went to Munich and afterward to Dresden, copying in each place more of the drawings of the old masters. He thought this a logical and very serious way of learning art. And so it was. In copying the drawings he got at the understructure whereas in the paintings he got only the surface. La Farge from first to last was always seeking the logical, philosophical, and scientific bases of things. And meanwhile thereby

"I kept in touch with that greatest of all characters of art, style—not the style of the academy or any one man, but the style of all



the schools, the manner of looking at art which is common to all important personalities, however fluctuating its form may be."

In Copenhagen he made a copy of a Rembrandt.

"I was enabled to learn a great deal of the methods of Rembrandt and to connect them with my studies. . . . Rubens I followed in Belgium, trying to see every painting of his throughout the whole kingdom and as many of his pupils' as I could gather in."

He had an admiration for the severe training of Rubens and for his later prodigal expenditure of energy and paint on canvas. In the autumn of 1857-1858 he was studying Titian, Velasquez, and many others of the famous masters at the Manchester Exhibition in England. There also he saw and studied the Preraphaelite painters and became acquainted with several of them.

"They made a very great and important impression upon me, which later influenced me in my first work when I began to paint."

When La Farge returned to New York (his father's illness had hastened his return) nothing as to art had been decided upon and no method of painting had been definitely learned. He had had a unique and very wonderful experience for a young man, had gathered up much information, and perhaps unconsciously had developed an inquiring attitude of mind. This latter became his habitual attitude; he was always con-

templative, meditative, disposed to question. Perhaps that is the reason why he still hesitated about embracing art as a profession. At any rate, he went back to the study of law, though not forsaking his interest in painting and architecture. The following year he took a room in the Tenth Street Studio Building, where he was accustomed to go to make little drawings and paint "in an amateurish way." He recognized that he needed technical training and once more thought of returning to Europe to get it.

In 1859 he went to Newport to study painting under William M. Hunt, whose methods he did not altogether like, though he was fond of the man. Hunt was then devoted to Jean François Millet, and, through Hunt, La Farge came to know that painter's work. He copied two or three of Millet's pictures but could not accept him wholly any more than he could Hunt. The truth was that even then La Farge was an original and would follow no one. He could not abide recipes for doing or making things, though eventually he invented a recipe of his own and followed that.

At Newport he did some landscapes looking through a window to show the difference in light between the inside and the outside. It was for educative purposes, not for picture-making. In the same way he painted flowers in a vase at haphazard, or did the corner of a table,

with no idea of composition but merely to get acquainted with all phases of light, texture, and surface. The next year he was back in New York, painting was temporarily abandoned, and presently he departed for Louisiana. He could not, however, keep away from painting wherever he went, and he soon returned to New York to start a picture of St. Paul Preaching for the Church of the Paulists. With John Bancroft he next took up the question of light and color, then being investigated by scientific men. That, he declares, had an important influence on his later work. But probably the event that definitely decided him for an art career was his marriage in 1860 to Miss Margaret Brown Perry, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin.

I have helped myself largely to Mr. Cortisoz's book (for which I am sure he will not quarrel with me) regarding these educational happenings of La Farge's early days, because they point to an unusual acquaintance with philosophic, literary, and artistic traditions. La Farge was saturated with them at twenty-two. His education was extraordinary when compared with his American contemporaries—Inness, Wyant, Martin, Homer. He had found himself before he was thirty and knew what he wanted to say and do, whereas Homer at sixty was still uncertain and groping. Art had come to La Farge almost as a child learns to talk,



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that is, unconsciously, without great effort. The formulas had been largely thought out for him and he had merely to accept them. With Inness, Wyant, and Martin it was necessary to make their own formulas, work out their own philosophy, establish their own premises. And that, too, after they had come to man's estate. La Farge had a great advantage over them. He was not only born to art but had it thrust upon him. With his fine natural endowments of mind and eye it is not, perhaps, remarkable that he afterward was able to achieve art in a large way and in more than one department.

But he did not rest content with his early experiences. He took up new problems and remained a student to his latest day. His mental curiosity was remarkable. He was always trying to get at the cause or sequence of things. I remember very well arguing at him one day, with undue vehemence perhaps, about some question of the hour, and hearing his quiet answer that it made no difference which of us was right, but that we should go along together and try to get at the truth. That was his Gallic cast of mind. He had no wish or care to put the other fellow in the wrong, and as for disputatious argument, it was not intellectually good form. In this respect Ruskin had amused and vexed him during his early years. The great critic was not only wrong in matter but in the method of presenting it. Fromentin, on



the contrary, pleased him much. The French critic's mind was of the same order as his own.

La Farge had evidently heard of Japanese art in Paris, for in 1863 he began collecting Japanese prints, sending directly to Japan for them. He records that he imported at that time many for himself and his friend Bancroft. He was interested not only in their linear patterns but in their color relations, particularly as shown in landscape. He was painting landscapes at this time and working out-of-doors.

"My programme was to paint from nature a portrait and yet to make distinctly a work of art which should remain as a type of the sort of subject I undertook."

Almost the whole of his theory of art lies in that sentence. It will apply to his painting of water-lilies as well as to his figures or landscapes. He was after a type of the species—something typical and universal rather than something odd or singular. Perhaps the most notable result of his theory and practice at this time was the landscape called "Paradise Valley," painted between 1866 and 1868.

The material for the "Paradise Valley" was found along the Rhode Island coast near Newport. It is a bare, almost treeless, scene, looking down toward the sea, and is cut up somewhat in the middle distance by the angle lines of stone fences. There is nothing about it of "the view," nothing that a Hudson River painter would

have looked at the second time; yet La Farge added beauty to its bare truth in such degree that it became a masterpiece. All of the painter's studies in light and line were put into it and yet kept from attracting too much attention in the exposition. And all of the infinite variety of tone and color common to the Atlantic shore landscape were added and blended together as one. The type as a whole emerged—the universal came out of the commonplace. A more perfect piece of work, a more beautiful picture of landscape, had not then, and has not since, been produced in American art. Of its kind it is unequalled.

The last time I saw this landscape was many years ago at an exhibition in the gallery of the Century Club. It held the place of honor on the wall, and I was looking at it, praising it unstintedly to a friend standing beside me. After I had exhausted my adjectives, I became aware of some one in the room behind me. I turned and saw La Farge standing there. Whether or not he had overheard me I did not know, but there being nothing to conceal, I told him just what I had been saying to my companion. He smiled and bowed and seemed greatly pleased. He was always too polite to question the compliments of his admirers, and much too broad-minded to scoff at praise, however unintelligent he might think it. But the point of my story is further along.



*Copyright by John La Farge.*

**"Paradise Valley," by John La Farge.**  
In the Collection of General Thornton K. Lothrop.





After his telling me how he came to paint the landscape and what he had sought to make out of it, I asked him why he had not continued with work of that kind—why he had not painted more Paradise Valleys. His answer was that he had done a number of landscapes similar in character but that no one seemed to care for them. There was no audience, no demand for them, and, worst of all, no one would buy them. He was forced to do something that would produce a revenue. That seemed to me at the time deplorable, but perhaps it was not all sheer loss to art, for his lack of pecuniary success with easel pictures probably had much to do with his taking up mural decoration and glass-work.

With a select public, however, La Farge had already won recognition. His landscapes and flower pictures—especially the latter with their lovely color, texture, and surface, and that indefinable feeling that is La Farge—met with appreciation from artists and amateurs. The Academy of Design elected him to its membership, and, a little later, a firm of Boston publishers began publishing some of his illustrations made for Browning's poems. He had planned some three hundred drawings for Browning, and for an edition of the Gospels many more. These were La Farge's romantic days, and the influences of French romanticism intellectually and his Japanese prints technically were rather

strong with him. In fancy he was harking back to Greek and mediæval myths, Bible legends, and Arabian Nights tales. But only a few drawings from each field finally found their way into print. They appeared in the old *Riverside Magazine* and were accounted very effective, even after the engraver had translated them. Every one who has written about La Farge has devoted a page or so to an analysis of his "Wolf Charmer" and "Piper of Hamelin." Criticised they were for what has been declared faulty construction and drawing but never for their lack of life. They were excellent examples of naturalistic drawing wherein accuracy is often sacrificed to vitality. But the telling quality of the illustrations was not so much their technique as their imagination. La Farge had inner as well as outer vision, and the conception of the wolf charmer, for example, as half-wolf himself, gnawing rather than playing his pipe, was perhaps the better part of its excellence.

But illustration was to engage his attention for only a short period. He was interested in things of larger decorative significance. Describing one day some work of art that I cannot now recall he used the word "decorative" and I remember his pausing and saying rather emphatically in parenthesis: "And when I say decorative, I am saying about the best thing I can about a picture." Imagination he had in abundance, but perhaps it was manifested



stronger in the light and color of his decorations than in such literary readings as the "Wolf Charmer." His glass was the finest flight in color of modern times. It remains so to this day. The same creative sense of hue on a large scale was shown in his mural work. His panels and lunettes have their individual meaning and their imaginative presentation of the type, but these are only parts of a whole which carries again by its decorative color sweep.

His first wall decorations were those for Trinity Church, Boston, in 1876. They were done under time pressure in less than six months—done in winter with open windows and everybody clad in overcoats and gloves. Ten or a dozen painters worked under him and with him, among them Frank Millet, Francis Lothrop, and George Maynard. It was the first attempt in America to do church decoration on a large scale with a group of painters directed by one head. The unusual conditions and requirements limited its success, and yet it was quickly recognized as being an initial step of much importance and La Farge was acclaimed as the leader of the new order. Thereafter commissions for churches, public buildings, and private houses came to him and did not cease to come up to his death. He at first did panels for the Church of the Incarnation, decorations for St. Thomas's Church, afterward destroyed by fire, and for the Reid house in New York; in his late years he

painted great lunettes for the capitol at St. Paul. Perhaps the climax of these wall-paintings is the picture of the "Ascension" set up on the chancel wall of the Church of the Ascension, in New York. It is his chief work, and is picture-making, wall-painting, and church decoration all in one.

The "Ascension" had its origin in one of La Farge's drawings for a western chapel. It was enlarged to meet the new need by putting in at the back a high and wide mountain landscape. The architectural place for it was simplified by placing on the chancel wall of the church a heavily gilded moulding, deep-niched, and with an arched top which acted at once both as a frame and a limit to the picture. The space was practically that of a huge window with a square base and a half-circle top requiring for its filling two groups of figures one above the other. La Farge placed his standing figures of the apostles and the holy women in the lower space and their perpendicular lines paralleled the uprights of the frame; at the top he placed an oval of angels hovering about the risen Christ, and, again, the rounded lines of the angel group repeated the curves of the gilded arch.

There was no great novelty in this arrangement. It was frankly adopted from Italian Renaissance painting and had been used for high altar-pieces by all the later painters—Andrea del Sarto, Raphael, Titian, Palma. They had



“The Muse,” by John La Farge.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





worked out the best way of filling that upright-and-arched space, and La Farge followed the tradition because he recognized its sufficiency. But when all that is said it should be added that his "Ascension" is no close following of Italian example. The grouping is different and the setting is quite the opposite of the Italian. This is an open-air Ascension, not a studio-lighted gathering of academic figures posed merely to repeat each other's linear contours. The apostles stand in a great valley plain with mountains at the sides and back. They stand *in*, not *out*, of the landscape. The angels are in a huge floating oval about the risen Christ. What beautiful moving circling figures they are! With what superb recognition of light, air, and space they are given! And how they hold their exact place in relation to the background and to the figures below them! All of La Farge's knowledge and skill came into play in painting these two groups that contrast with and yet complete each other. They are his highest achievement in figure-painting. It may be merely provincial pride that makes one think they do not suffer by comparison with the groups of the great Italians, yet there are intelligent people who believe that.

But after one has studied and wondered over these figures, he begins to look further, and finally comes to question if the enveloping landscape is not the more beautiful part of the pic-

ture. No such landscape was ever painted by any old master, not even by Titian in his "Presentation" picture in the Venice Academy. And thereby hangs a tale. La Farge could not at first get the right landscape for it, and in the middle of the work, that is in 1886, he and his friend Henry Adams went on a long trip to Japan. It was in the mountains of Japan (or was it, perhaps, later in the South Sea islands?) that he saw and sketched the superb landscape that now does service in the background of the "Ascension." It fitted the figures exactly and is their natural and proper environment. Figures and groups from Italy that are not Italian and landscapes from Japan that are not Japanese blend together perfectly because translated, transmuted, by the genius of La Farge into something that is peculiarly his own type of the Ascension. In such fashion, and of such materials, is great art brought into being.

La Farge's glass-work carried over the greater part of his artistic life. Mr. Cortissoz tells us that he did several thousand windows of various patterns and designs. For many years, and up to his death, he had a shop in South Washington Square where, with assistants and workmen, the more mechanical part of window construction was carried on. But he looked after every part of it from start to finish. He never let go of his workman, never allowed himself as a designer to be eliminated by turning his



design over wholly to the shop. He followed up everything and exacted results while inspiring enthusiasm and intelligence in his men. The result was that the work, in spite of the touch of others, remained peculiarly that of La Farge and bore his individual stamp.

In window-making he tried dozens of different experiments to get depth, variation, and complement of tone by repeated platings of pot-metal glass. As a result he produced brilliant jewel-like glass theretofore never dreamed of. With iridescent and opalescent sheets at hand in countless tones and shades he began the construction of his window, not in patches of color, but with a crayon cartoon, just as he had designed pictures. He made a pattern, filled the spaces rightly, and thought of the colors afterward. The lead lines helped out the design and did not break or block it by haphazard crossings at stated intervals. In other words, his radiant color schemes were every one of them based in design and had a foundation of drawing under them.

“This, then, is a study of line and is different from the notion of some intellectual friends that the line is to be put on afterward.” \*

And yet there was no attempt to do in glass what could be better done on canvas. The brilliant transparent tones were peculiarly fitted for glass because they could not be squeezed

\* La Farge in a letter to Mr. Cortissoz.

out of a tube or laid down with a brush. I recall seeing in his shop years ago a tall narrow window, done, if I remember rightly, for the Whitney house, showing a robed female figure scattering autumn leaves upon a pool. The brilliant autumn tints, the light from the reflecting water, would have been impossible to render fully with pigments, and the blending of light and air seemed attainable only with La Farge's delicate opaline glass. It seemed to me at the time a quite wonderful window, and yet he did many of them pitched in the same key of splendor.

In the midst of wall and window decorations La Farge found little time for easel-painting—something he regretted but could not help. Twice, however, he broke away from the shop and went upon long trips. The first was to Japan with Henry Adams in 1886. Out of that came many water-color sketches and drawings, besides a charming book, *An Artist's Letters from Japan*. To some the book is of more interest than the drawings. The temple-doors and interiors and Buddhas of his sketches are, no doubt, truthfully illustrative, and that is perhaps their failing as pictures. The model was too apparent and the artist not so much in evidence as could be wished for. His own negative definition of art applies just here: "It is never the *mere representation* of what we see." Some of the mountain landscapes, however, are very fine,



**“The Three Kings,” by John La Farge.**  
In the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.





and his garden bits recall the early La Farge of the pond-lilies and the "Paradise Valley."

His second long trip was again with Henry Adams and this time to the South Seas. He was gone for a year or more, from 1890 and on, and out of this trip came another engaging book, *Reminiscences of the South Seas*, besides many water-color drawings. The water-colors were again illustrative, but perhaps they were more animated than the Japanese series, had to do more intimately with the island life, and were often strikingly picturesque in theme and movement. With them came also a number of small sea-pieces showing bays, harbors, and islands done with the greatest simplicity and yet having a satin-and-silk quality about them quite indescribable in its beauty. These silvery sea-pieces are in the same class with La Farge's early violets and roses—things that are exquisite in their surface texture and their color beauty. His mountain landscapes of the South Seas are again superb in their greens and blues. A love and a gift for landscape always remained with him, and one often wonders, had he devoted himself to this alone, what new revelations of the world about us he might have handed down in art.

The groups of natives in dances or games or ceremonies naturally attract the most attention in the South Seas water-colors. Technically they are interesting because of their hark back

to Delacroix. Not only the reds, blues, greens, and flesh notes are like Delacroix, but the drawing of the hands and feet, the movement of arms and legs are much like that master. All his life La Farge had carried that impress about with him. A few years before he died one of his pictures, at an exhibition or sale, was so like a Delacroix that at first, from across the room, I thought it by the great romanticist. Some time later in mentioning the fact to La Farge he nodded his head and said that he had been very much influenced by Delacroix and no doubt unconsciously did things in his style or manner.

To say that one prefers La Farge's travel books to his travel sketches is not to disparage the sketches, for the books were extraordinarily good. He had a great admiration for Fromentin's *Une Année dans le Sahel*, and perhaps that volume had not a little to do in suggesting the form of the volumes on Japan and the South Seas. They are impressionistic in that they record moods, thoughts, and talks that make up a quite perfect text for his sketches. They are both grave and gay, profound and volatile, forceful and yet charming. La Farge had the literary sense quite as much as the pictorial, and had he chosen to make a profession of letters he would perhaps have risen to as great a height as he did in painting.

While a student under Hunt at Newport he



became well acquainted with Henry James, whom he later on advised to take up literature. In the light of subsequent achievement that must be regarded as good advice, and yet James had the pictorial cast of mind and might have made a fine painter. At any rate, some of his best work in writing was his criticism of painting. La Farge, too, with a mind pictorially inclined, put out some of his best thoughts in a book of art criticism entitled *Considerations on Painting*. It was delivered originally as lectures to art students, but it must have shot far over their little heads. It is too profound to be grasped at once and often requires a second reading to apprehend the meaning, but it is the best piece of art criticism put forth in America. In kind and excellence it ranks with Fromentin's *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*—the classic of the craft.

Fromentin was about the only writer on art that La Farge cared for. He was kind enough to send me a copy of his *Considerations on Painting* when it was published, and later, in talking over the book with him, he took occasion to remark (as afterward in print) that he had read thousands of pages of art criticism "without finding anything that a person seriously devoted to his profession of art could find of the slightest use." At the time I ventured to suggest to him that aid to artists was not the object of art criticism, that an attempt to instruct professionals would argue greater knowledge in the

critic than in the artist and be presumptuous, that the critic wrote for the public and thought to be of service by calling attention to and explaining certain things that might otherwise be overlooked or misjudged. Moreover, it was suggested that the writer, too, had his design and pattern in words which he was trying to work out artistically and decoratively, and that the subject, whether criticism, history, poetry, or fiction, was of as little importance with him as with the painter. Ruskin in art criticism, Newman in sermons and lectures, and Carlyle in history and essay were possibly greater artists than Dickens and Thackeray in fiction.

There was nothing new about that to La Farge, but he acquiesced in it by bowing and smiling a little, especially over Ruskin, for whom he came as near having contempt as for any one. Not only Ruskin's ideas but his vehemence of style were not to La Farge's fancy. He wrote in no such hectic vein in his *Considerations on Painting*. The whole treatise is an inquiry, not an argument, and through it all you feel the evenly poised, well-balanced mind that is weighing the question and is not to be stampeded by rhetoric or eloquence of any kind. He was too intelligent for enthusiasm or emotion. He thought out everything very calmly, and in the midst of conviction often doubted or questioned his own conclusions. It was his normal attitude of mind—a mind that indulged in subtleties, that saw as many meanings in a problem as a rug-weaver's

eye sees colors in a pattern of tapestry. It was the attempt to put these subtleties in parenthesis that sometimes makes his *Considerations on Painting* hard reading, and yet no one would wish them deleted. They are side-lights that illumine the quest. The book is an epitome of La Farge's method of thinking and is a type of its kind in literature as truly as his "Paradise Valley" is a type in painting.

As for the philosophic mind, he practically describes himself in one passage in an article in *Scribner's Magazine*\* on the "Teaching of Art." It is worth quoting:

"The noblest of all the gifts of the great institutions of learning is a certain fostering of elevation of mind. It is not so much by what he knows that the man brought under the trainings of the great academies is marked; it is by his acquaintance with the size of knowledge; with, if I may say so, the impossibility of completing its full circle; with the acquaintance of the manners of enlarging his boundaries; with the respect of other knowledge than his own; with a certain relative humility as compared with the narrower pride of him who knows not the size of the spaces of the world of knowledge. And such an attitude of mind, such an elevation above petty prides, such a belief in something larger than one's self, such an openness to the world, is the privilege of a full artistic development."

La Farge as a painter, as an inventor of pre-

\* *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. 64, page 181.



cious glass, as an illustrator of Oriental life, as a writer of books, was a great success; as a student, a man of learning, a philosopher and a talker he was not less so. He had been born of cultivated parents and all his life had been saturated with the intellectual. He knew how to think, weigh, and judge matters, and he knew how to express himself in paint, in letters, and in words. His mental poise was remarkable for its stability, though he was not stubborn and was always open to new light. His conversation was serious, and his manner grave, courteous, calm as that of a French academician. Certain eccentricities—mental habits that indicated the questioner—were peculiar to him, and Henry Adams, his travelling companion, was led to speak of him as a wonderful mind and a wonderful contradiction. By that, perhaps he meant that La Farge always stopped short of the positive conclusion. He guarded himself with qualifying clauses, as though conscious of another side to the question.

His talk was quite as delightful as his books. He had read almost everything, knew almost every one in the modern art world, and his fund of information seemed as exhaustless as his charm of manner. And yet withal he was rather a shy man and had to be sought out. For many years he dined regularly at the Century Club, and more often alone than with company. If any one sat opposite to him at his little table,

the chances were two to one that the visitor was self-invited. He held as intimates for many years Clarence King, John Hay, and Henry Adams. They must have proved a rare quartet of wits around a dinner-table, for all of them were exceptionally brilliant talkers. But I never heard of a fifth at the table.

Honors had come to La Farge from the beginning. He had received medals and prizes and degrees, he wore the Legion of Honor in his buttonhole, was president of the Society of American Artists, and an initial member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He took them all very calmly. They were recognitions that he did not despise; neither did he count them as crowns of glory. His well-poised mind, with its Oriental sympathies, could rise above praise, and yet he was human enough to like it. When the gold medal of the Architectural League was presented to him he startled the honor-bearers by suggesting that it was late in coming. That was not so much egotism as the bald truth, and he could not refrain from pointing it out.

La Farge had never been physically robust, and during his latter years he had known much illness. There were periods when he was totally incapacitated and could do no more than lie still. He took that calmly, too. He was a philosopher always and made the best of things. Perhaps that is the reason why with his frail body he

lived on to seventy-four, not dying until November, 1910. He lived his character to the last, and when he died the painter-world, if no other, knew that a master mind as well as a master craftsman had passed out.

In the arts he was our first great scholar and spoke as one having authority. With his learning, his imagination, and his skill he gave rank to American art more than any other of the craft. For that reason he is to-day hailed as master and written down in our annals as belonging with the Olympians. He deserves the title and the separate niche.



VII

JAMES ABBOTT McNEILL WHISTLER



## VII

### JAMES ABBOTT McNEILL WHISTLER

AFTER considering La Farge, it is difficult to think of Whistler other than in terms of contrast. They were of the same time, their tastes were not dissimilar, and many features of their theory and practice were in agreement; but Whistler's impetuosity and contentiousness seem magnified when set over against the gravity and reticence of La Farge. He had not the latter's mental poise, nor philosophy, nor tenacity, nor patience. The seriousness of his art always suffered from the acrimony of his talk or the cleverness of his writing or the flare of his conduct. He was a wit, to be sure, but not a wise one; a brilliant writer but not a profound one; an æsthetic bravo but not a discreet one. His social activities gave his art a wide notoriety, but that rather harmed than helped its permanent fame. The mob enjoyed his caustic utterances but continued to look askance at his symphonies and nocturnes. What else could have been expected? Art explains itself or it falls. Talk may make it talked about but does not establish its final worth.

And so one, at times, wishes that Whistler had said nothing, written nothing, explained nothing.



His art standing alone would eventually have vindicated itself as did that of Hals and Rembrandt and Velasquez. There is not the least bit of flippancy or irritability or waspishness about it. If we knew naught of his life and had never read *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* and the *Ten O'Clock*, we could not have derived the militant Whistler from his pictures. They are cast in a vein of decorative beauty and done not only with the greatest seriousness but with the greatest tranquillity. With their simplicity and largeness of vision, their fastidiousness of arrangement, their charm of mood and loveliness of color they would point to an Ariel-like creator who was in love with color refinements, a devotee of nature's minor chords, her shadowy manifestations, her evanescent harmonies. And that would have been the true Whistler—the Whistler that fame will not allow to die. But his clarification is still some distance away. Appreciation is clouded by the presence of the egotist, the dandy, the bitter-tongued wit, the maker of paradoxes—passing phases of temperament quite aside from his reckoning as an artist, mental poses forced upon him by circumstances which he doubtless felt he had to meet and overcome.

That is not to say that the capacity for verbal fisticuffs was not born in him, though he did not show it in his early days, nor while a student in Paris. It was only after he took up life in

London and was reviled by British criticism that he stepped outside of his art to defend himself. Perhaps he took to words as readily as Cellini to throat-cutting or Goya to bull-fighting, but it was not the less unfortunate. That Cellini was a bravo and Goya a roysterer and Whistler a maker of enemies merely suggests that artists may have dual natures like other people and not be the better for them. Their art is not improved thereby.

But it is perhaps useless to argue against the admission of the irrelevant. The world likes it and will have it. That Bacon, Titian, Goethe were mean in spirit is inconsequent backstairs gossip, but it is taken as a relish along with their vision and their wisdom. Just so with Whistler. The present generation of painters thinks his *Ten O'Clock* the law and gospel of art, and a dozen biographies of him record his epigrams and corrosive remarks along with his epoch-making pictures. We shall have to take the chaff with the wheat.

Perhaps the chief infirmity of Whistler's make-up was his lack of patience. Nature had endowed him with a bright, alert mind that flashed and scintillated but wavered perhaps in continuity of purpose. It was a true-enough American mind in that at first it balked at effort and sought to vault over obstacles by bursts of speed or sudden inspiration. The average American believes more in inspiration than in work, though

as applied directly to Whistler we must not push that point too far. There were periods when he labored hard but there was no prolonged patience, no calm philosophy of enduring and biding his time. As a boy he would never submit entirely to education, and as a young man the rigor of studio-training fretted him. He took as much of each as pleased him and let the rest go. He resented guidance and resisted discipline as more or less of a restraint on individuality.

The story of his birth, family, and early education is told minutely in the excellent biography by the Pennells.\* From their account it appears that Whistler was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1834. He was reported to have been born in Baltimore, and he did not deny the report. "If any one likes to think I was born in Baltimore, why should I deny it? It is of no consequence to me." His parents were refined, educated people, the best that the United States at that time was capable of producing. His father was a West Point graduate, a major in the United States army, and, at the time of Whistler's birth, an engineer, building locks and canals at Lowell. In 1843 the whole Whistler family went to Russia, where the father had been called by the Czar to build the St. Petersburg-Moscow Railway. In St. Petersburg the children

\* *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, by E. R. and J. Pennell, Philadelphia, 1911.



were carefully tutored, especially in such polite learning as the languages and the arts. Whistler was already drawing in a boyish way, and was no doubt receiving impressions of art from various sources. In 1847 he was in England for the summer with his mother, and again in 1849 he went there for the winter because his health could not stand the Russian climate. In the latter year his father died, and shortly thereafter Mrs. Whistler, with the children, returned to America. Whistler the boy was sent to school at Pomfret, and his mother records that he was still "an excitable spirit with littler perseverance," and had "habits of indolence."

Two years of Pomfret and he was entered as a cadet at the West Point Military Academy. He remained there three years, and was dropped in 1854 because deficient in chemistry. Besides, he could not remember dates, and at cavalry drill he had difficulty in keeping on his horse. These seem slight reasons for dropping his name from the rolls, but the West Point requirements in those days, as now, were rather rigorous. He appealed to Washington for reinstatement but was denied. In its place a job was offered him in the Coast Survey. He accepted and drew on government maps for some months, resigning in 1855. The same year he went to Paris to study art and entered the studio of Gleyre, one of the leading semi-classic painters of the time.

Whistler's boyhood and youth suggest little out of the ordinary except that he was better born, better educated, and had better advantages than the average aspiring youth. In art he had left only the usual record of desultory drawings. Professor Weir at West Point had given him lessons, but nothing remarkable resulted therefrom. Some of the sketches of his West Point days are preserved, and while they are not astonishing, they are nevertheless moderately indicative of the coming master. Two drawings called "The Valentine" and "Sam Weller and Mary" have the same small delicate line and an attempt at tone by shadings and hatchings that characterize his etchings and lithographs of later date. But Whistler's career does not begin for us until he reached Paris in 1855—the year before La Farge's arrival.

There are conflicting stories about what he did or did not do under Gleyre. He must have learned something of drawing and construction besides such small studio devices as arranging colors on the palette, preparing the canvas, using ivory-black as a base of tone—a method which he retained all his life. In actual handling of the brush he seems to have gotten something from his associates, Fantin-Latour and Degas, who were then following Courbet. Evidently he did not care for the routine of the *atelier*. Drouet, the sculptor, who was one of his intimates, did not think that he worked much but was well disposed toward jokes, pranks, and

a good time. By way of interlude during his two years with Gleyre he went with a companion on a trip through Alsace and did some etchings, known as the French set. In 1857 he made a trip to England and studied pictures at the Manchester Exhibition. Returned to Paris, he remained there until 1859, living in the Latin Quarter, copying pictures at the Louvre, and doing original work of his own. His first notable picture, "At the Piano," was sent to the Salon of 1859 and rejected, though two of his etchings were accepted. Sent to the Royal Academy the same year, the picture and the etchings were well received and praised.

There were many journeyings backward and forward from London during this year. Whistler's sister had married Seymour Haden and was living there; his student friends of Paris days—Poynter, Armstrong, Ionides, Du Maurier—were there and he had not as yet quarrelled with them; above all, the Thames was there. So finally he took up his residence in London and began work along the river. He did eleven etchings of the Thames set, and the next year painted the "Wapping," the "Thames in Ice," and later in the year "The Music Room," besides a number of portraits. In 1861 he was in Brittany doing the "Coast of Brittany" in the style of Courbet, then in Paris at work on "The White Girl," and later at Biarritz painting "The Blue Wave," again in the style of Courbet.

Up to this time everything had gone fairly well



with him. He had had an artistic success at the English exhibitions, though his "White Girl" had been rejected; many friends—Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Swinburne, and others—recognized his ability; there was as yet no marked denunciation from press or public. It was not called for, even from a Philistine point of view. Nothing very ultra or bizarre showed in his painting. It was modern, but it was the modernity of Gleyre, Courbet, Fantin—the advanced painting of the times. The pattern of his pictures was perhaps something of an innovation, because already he had begun flattening it. That may have been the reason for the rejection of "At the Piano" and "The White Girl." But there could have been nothing very forced about the flattening then, for to-day the pictures look just a little old-fashioned. For the realistic requirements of 1860 they were extremely well planned and executed, and the wonder now is that every one did not give them positive recognition at once. Perhaps the handling was a little too free and the modelling of the figures too low in relief for the man in the street, but on the whole there was small cause for complaint on the part of the young painter.

If there was little question at this time about Whistler's pictures, there was none at all about his etchings. Every one, even the stodgiest of Britons, liked them. Perhaps that was due again to their conformity to custom. There was little about the early work very different from

that of other etchers except that it was freer, surer, and better. The long swinging line, as in the dry point of "Jo," or the sharply contrasted blacks, as in the "Drouet," were given with emphasis. Contrast rather than uniformity was the aim and there was little attempt at pronounced tone effect, or flattening of the figure, or disturbance of perspective—the thing most dear to the viewing public. In fact, Whistler's etchings have always been exempt from the denunciation of his paintings. People could see in them things realistic and representative; the decorative pattern did not bother them.

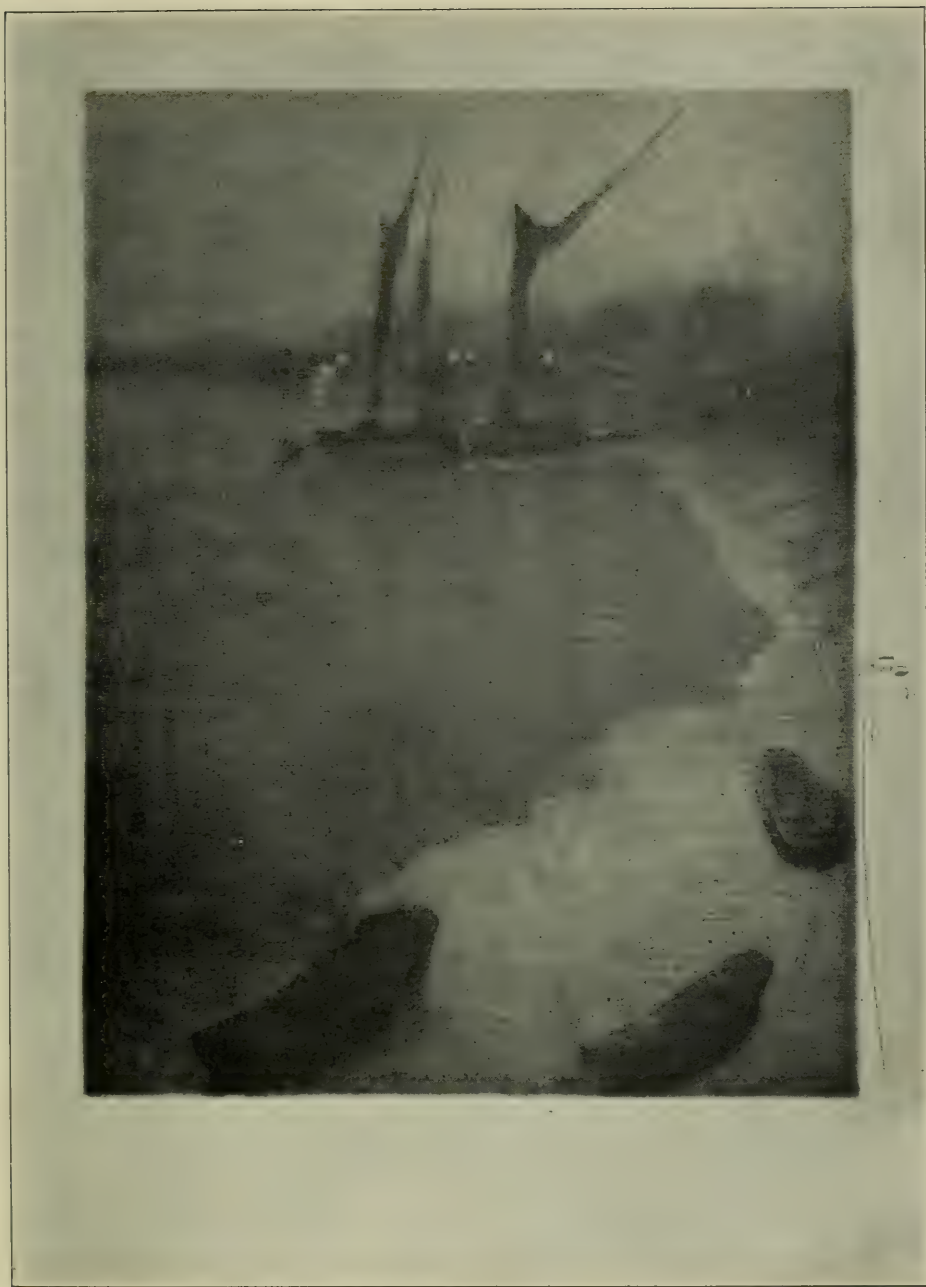
There was no hue and cry raised in England over Whistler's early work because it was not vehemently radical or audaciously assertive. He had accepted and followed the classic tradition of Gleyre, had modified it by studies of Rembrandt, Courbet, Fantin, Manet, had bettered it by observations and methods entirely his own; but he was going with the tide, not against it or across it. Had he died at, say, twenty-seven, and the world had only his early etchings, "The White Girl," "At the Piano," and "The Music Room," to go by, it is doubtful if his dozen biographies would have been written, or that he would have held more than a modest niche in the hall of fame. It was when he became a great innovator that he met with vituperation, and, by the same token, it was only then that he became a really great artist.

The innovation came with his modification of

the realistic tradition of the Western world and his introduction of the decorative tradition of the Eastern world. The latter was a better-based, a fairer, a more alluring tradition than the one he had been reared in; but he did not, could not, go over to it in its entirety and turn himself into an Occidental painter on silk. That would have been mere forceless imitation. Instead of doing so, he strove to graft the Eastern shoot upon the Western stock, to take what was best of Japanese art and blend it with French art, thus harmonizing the two traditions. Representative figures from the Western world were put into an Eastern pattern and made to do decorative service. The Thames was turned into nocturnes, portraits were changed to arrangements in grays or browns or blacks, and London *genre* became so many symphonies or harmonies in gold, blue, or old rose. The result was a rare bouquet of orchids which the English public, reared on primroses and daisies, did not find in its botany book and could not understand. No wonder there was confusion, misunderstanding, and denunciation. With his Oriental gospel Whistler in London was scoffed at and reviled. He had brought a new faith to English art, but no one believed in it or would receive it. There was nothing to do but stone the evangelist. The stoning roused his ire.

“ though young he was a Tartar  
And not at all disposed to prove a martyr.”





“Nocturne. Gray and Silver. Chelsea Embankment,”  
by James A. McNeill Whistler.

In the Freer Collection, Smithsonian Institution.



And so the quarrel began and ran on for forty years, until the painter died, and the British public bought his pictures and hung them in its national galleries, and the incident was declared closed. The story is old in art but this one possesses distinctly modern variations.

Whistler had probably begun the study of Japanese art before 1860, and there is equal probability that in Paris he saw not the best examples of it, but only its latter-day manifestations in the color prints of Hokusai, Utamaro, and Hiroshige. However that may have been, he saw enough to change his ideas about pattern and to turn him half-way round, at least, from the representative to the decorative. That was the beginning of the misunderstanding. Time out of mind artist and public had been conscious that painting possessed the dimensions of height and breadth, and, by illusion, was capable of a third dimension in depth or thickness. The illusion was produced by variations of light, shade, or color which gave modelling. From long custom a preference grew up for figures modelled out—a depth by protrusion rather than by recession. When, therefore, Whistler came to the fore and insisted that the third dimension was something of a vulgarity and that figures should not be round and stand out but be flat and *stand in*, there was instant disagreement.

He went further. Linear perspective was a cheap accomplishment and the delight in it was



unintelligent. There was infinitely more distinction in aerial perspective whereby recession and depth were produced by a degradation of values. Aerial perspective was, in fact, the only perspective worth while. There should not be too much depth. The pattern should be kept flat and the picture should not "break through the wall" but be a part of it. Moreover, contrast of color was less decorative, less charming, than accord. A picture should be pitched in a certain tonal key and maintain the tone throughout. The minor chords were more refined than those of higher pitch and greater resonance; a twilight or a midnight was more lovely than "a foolish sunset." Finally the picture was finished when its decorative pattern was complete. The whole meaning of the picture was in its look. It should make no other appeal. Piety, patriotism, sentiment, emotion, story were all barred out as beside the mark—foreign to the medium.

All this Whistler said in his pictures and it irritated him that the public would not recognize his point of view, but chose instead to judge his work by the standards of a Leighton and a Millais. By way of supplement he sought to explain with tongue and pen, but he used too many metaphors, paradoxes, and sophisms, with the result that the audience was more mystified than ever. He achieved a reputation for insincerity; was derided as a coxcomb, a mountebank, an impostor, a charlatan. Finally it was

discovered that some of the things he said were sharp-pointed, that he was a wit, a dandy, a gay fellow. And they laughed. They would not take either his word or his art seriously. It was admitted, with some complacency, that he was a good etcher, but as a painter he had not fulfilled expectations. The prophet had arrived ahead of his time.

The Japanese influence—the most potent of all in Whistler's art—began to show itself gradually and did not come out entirely in the open until such pictures as the “Lange Leizen,” “The Gold Screen,” “The Balcony,” and the “Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine” appeared. With them not only the flat pattern but Tokio porcelains, fans, screens, robes were shown. There was some incongruity in the appearances, which Whistler did not seek to conceal. The figure in the “Lange Leizen” is English, sits on a chair like an English model, and is in an English interior; but Japanese costume and blue-and-white pots and jars are introduced. Whistler regarded it as a color scheme and called it “An Arrangement in Purple and Rose,” but his audience saw only the incongruity. “The Balcony” again was mystifying. There were four figures in Japanese robes on an iron-railed platform with an outlook on the Thames. There were bamboo screens and potted azaleas and blue-and-white tea things. Again there was the impossible—Japan set down in London.

The subtitle, "A Harmony in Flesh Color and Green," explained nothing. The picture was judged by its meaning, not by its appearance, and, of course, it meant nothing in an English sense.

The "Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine" was even more startling. Every one knew it was a young Greek girl who posed as the Princesse, and the masquerade of Japanese robe and rug and screen and fan was only a pretense. The subtitle of "Rose and Silver" again did not enlighten. What was wanted was the common sense of it and not the harmony or the arrangement. But it had no common sense; it was merely a fantasy in color. Persistently they looked for the wrong thing and would not see what the painter wished them to see. It was just so with "The Little White Girl"—a beautiful symphony in white showing a young girl in muslin leaning against a white mantel with her face reflected in a mirror. It was Japanese only in the fan, the flowers, and the vase, but the arrangement was too flat for public appreciation, and the girl was declared the "most bizarre of bipeds."

All through the sixties this misapprehension of purpose and aim persisted, and toward 1870 another riddle was presented with the appearance of the nocturnes. They were things done along the Thames at dusk and were revelations of that blue-air envelope which forms when the





"The Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine," by James A.  
McNeill Whistler.

In the Freer Collection, Smithsonian Institution.



shadow of the world begins to creep up the Eastern sky. The idea had perhaps been suggested to Whistler in the color prints of Hiroshige and he had afterward found its reality in English twilights. Such a motive was quite the opposite of Turner's blazing sunset upon which the generations had been reared. Everything was muffled, vague in outline, half seen as to place. Much was left to the imagination, and as for the composition, it was arranged with the greatest simplicity. Indeed, it was so simple that people thought it must be foolish and said so without hesitation.

Again the subtitles of "Blue and Gold" and "Black and Gold" carried no meaning. Even the experienced Ruskin could see nothing in the later "Falling Rocket" but "a coxcomb flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." It was "cockney impudence" and "wilful imposture." That was more than Whistler could stand, and he began a libel suit against Ruskin in the course of which the Attorney-General of England said he "did not know when so much amusement had been afforded the British public as by Mr. Whistler's pictures." The trial was a farce and the laugh went against Whistler. But he laughs best who laughs last, and it has not been the British public that has done the latest laughing.

There had been merriment before that, and—incredible as it may seem—over Whistler's now celebrated portrait of his mother. It was ad-



mitted to the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1872 only after a well-known academician had threatened to resign if it were rejected. It was not wanted, but having been received, it was treated as a joke. London revised its opinion about the portrait later on. After the French Government bought it for the Luxembourg it was thought, even by the hosts of Philistia, to be Whistler's best effort, and there was much talk of its refined motherly spirit and decent air—praises that the painter resented, telling the public that the sitter was no affair of theirs and that their only interest should be in “the arrangement in gray and black.”

The portrait of Carlyle followed, and was not unlike the mother portrait in its color scheme and pattern. Nothing was round in modelling, or projected, or stood out in the canvas. The wall, the chair, the figure, even the head, were flattened, and to that extent rendered incomprehensible to the general. The ponderous *Times* proclaimed that “before such pictures . . . critic and spectator are alike puzzled. Criticism and admiration seem alike impossible, and the mind vacillates between a feeling that the artist is playing a practical joke upon the spectator or that the painter is suffering from some peculiar optical illusion.” Eventually the Carlyle won its way, and is now one of the treasures of the Glasgow Corporation Art Gallery. But for years no one would touch it with a pair of tongs.

Both the Carlyle and the mother portraits had their prototypes in the groups of Frans Hals at Haarlem. Whistler much admired Hals's late portraits of Women Regents there, and found in them his "arrangement in gray and black." But about the same time with the Carlyle he painted a portrait of Miss Alexander, the like of which had never before been seen. It was the portrait of a little girl, hat in hand, standing at full length in a room, with daisies at the side and butterflies at the back. The title of it was a "Harmony in Gray and Green." The pattern was beautiful, the color delightful, the pose childlike, and even realistic. But London would not have it. It was "gruesomeness in gray," "a rhapsody in raw child and cobwebs," "a disagreeable presentment," and "uncompromisingly vulgar." Not even in the turbulent times of Delacroix and "the drunken broom" had criticism so cheapened its array and shot so wide of the mark.

In spite of abuse Whistler continued producing portraits—one of Leyland in evening dress standing at full length, an "arrangement in black"; one of Mrs. Leyland, never entirely completed, a very beautiful "symphony in flesh color and pink"; one of Mrs. Huth in black velvet, another "arrangement in black." They were all realistic enough as regards the likeness but decoratively arranged as regards pattern and color. They were, once more, the blended view of the West and the East, and Whistler

never tried to disguise the fact. He sought to place the figure in the canvas as far as he stood from the sitter when painting the picture, but otherwise he adhered to the flattening of the pattern, the simplicity of the arrangement, and the predominance of a tone of color.

In 1876 Whistler was given *carte blanche* to produce one of his tone effects in a room at the Leyland house. This afterward became known as the Peacock Room. It held the picture of the "Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine" at one end, was decorated elsewhere with peacocks, furnished with cabinets of blue-and-white china, and set off with blue and gold in the walls and ceiling. The idea of the peacocks had probably come to Whistler from some Japanese master, perhaps Okio, and the rest of it was his own arrangement of color. The next year was that of the suit against Ruskin. London laughed and Whistler shortly thereafter went into bankruptcy. Everything was seized and sold, bringing little or nothing. The tide was at its lowest ebb, and the painter was left stranded, but by no means dead or even moribund.

When he had sufficiently recuperated he went off to Venice, where he gathered a little coterie of admirers about him who referred to him as "the master," and where he talked much, and did some etchings and some pastels on colored paper. The first series of Venetian etchings, twelve in number, were done in the summer of



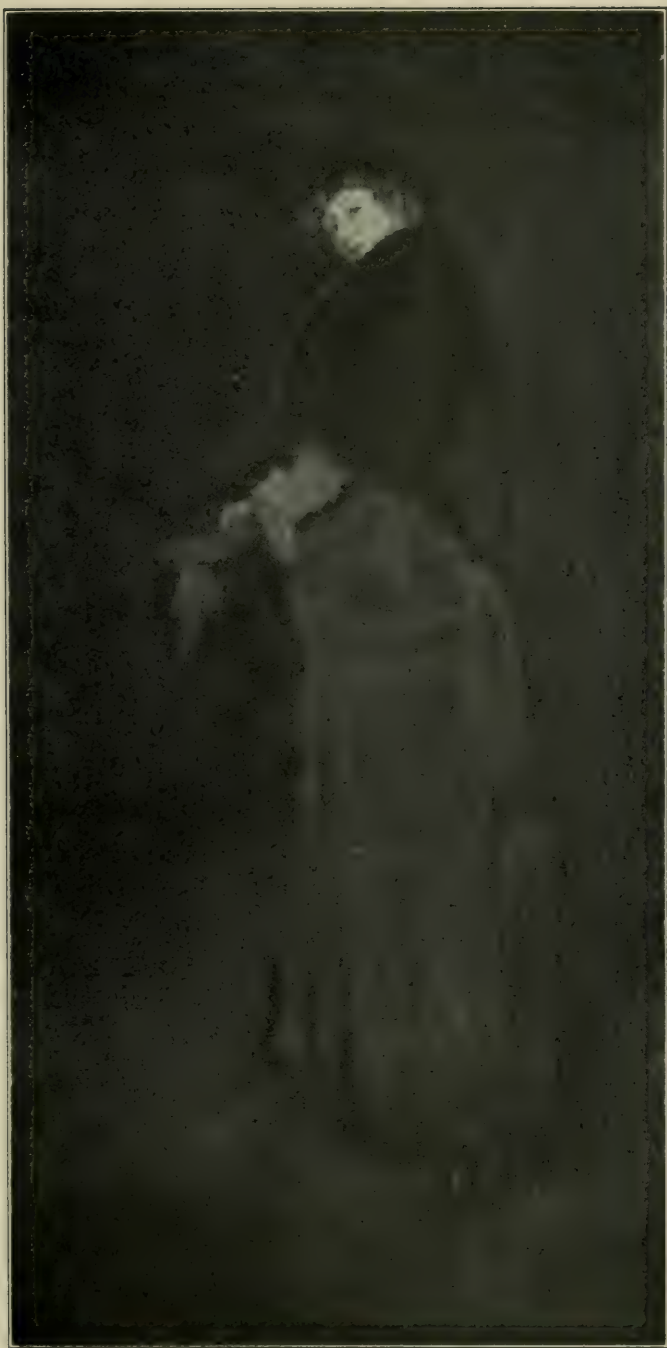
1880, and possibly he never went beyond such plates as "The Rialto," "The Bridge," and "The Traghetto." They seem the most flawless of his etched work. As for the pastels, they were largely notes of color, line, or movement, and while charming as notes, they were not impeccable in drawing. They were never intended to be realistic in any modern sense; they were, in fact, mere flying autumn leaves that meant nothing aside from form and color and their airy lightness.

In November Whistler returned to London, and the sniping and sharpshooting began again. It was temporarily interrupted by the death of his mother in January, but soon broke out anew. Portraits were being painted—that of Duret in evening clothes with a domino on his arm, and one of Lady Archibald Campbell, called "The Yellow Buskin," an "arrangement in black," being the most notable. "The Yellow Buskin," now in the Fairmount Park Gallery, Philadelphia, appeals to many people as perhaps Whistler's most spirited and effective portrait, but London criticism viewed it lightly. The *Morning Advertiser* said "its obvious affectations render the work displeasing," and another critic stated that "he has placed one of his portraits on an asphalt floor and against a coal-black background, the whole apparently representing a dressy woman in an inferno of the worldly." The public was equally unconvinced. So in 1884

Whistler mounted the platform at Princes Hall and in his *Ten O'Clock* set forth not only his philosophy of art but his scorn and contempt for almost everybody and everything excepting art and artists. The lecture created a stir, was repeated at Oxford and Cambridge, and Whistler became famous as one who could write even if he could not paint. Oddly enough, his lecture seemed to command more respect than his pictures, though it had not a tithe of their sincerity.

At any rate, the painter's fortunes now began to mend. He joined the Society of British Artists, and two years later became its president. In 1888 he was married to Beatrix Godwin, widow of E. B. Godwin, the architect, afterward moving to No. 21 Cheyne Walk, where many orders for portraits came to him. Success and honors came also. France gave him the Legion of Honor, Bavaria made him an academician, he had the Cross of St. Michael, and later on Glasgow University gave him an LL.D. His pictures at auction increased in price five and ten fold; his commission prices were in proportion. He grew so affluent that he could even decline to paint a ceiling for the Boston Public Library. At last the light was beginning to dawn—a trifle late, to be sure, but nevertheless it was welcomed by the painter.

The rest is soon told. In 1892 he moved to Paris and lived in the rue du Bac. A studio was opened for pupils in Paris at which he agreed to give



“The Yellow Buskin,” by James A. McNeill  
Whistler.

In the W. P. Wiltach Collection, Fairmount Park Gallery.





lessons. It was popular at first, but did not last long. He travelled back and forth to London a good deal, and finally returned to England to live. Quarrels had followed him to Paris and the Eden trial had taken place there. It was unfortunate. *Trilby* had been written and Whistler was parodied in it, which caused another tempest in a teapot. Then Mrs. Whistler died, and that was not only a great shock but a lasting grief. He never quite got over it. He wandered to Paris and Rome, but he cared little for them; he kept at work with feverish energy, but he accomplished little. He was evidently broken, not only in spirit but in body; and his death in July, 1903, was hardly a surprise to his more intimate friends. The overstrung bow at last had snapped.

For many years Whistler had been wrongly estimated alike by friend and foe. That one admired and the other condemned did not change the measure of extravagance. There was exaggeration on both sides. Since his death his critics have held their tongues, but many of his admirers have burst into print with impressions and reminiscences that are quite out of proportion and give a misleading idea of the man and the painter. The best account of him is that of the Pennells. They were devoted to him and wrote enthusiastically about him, as they should; but they did not fail to give the pros and cons in parallel columns. Moreover, they did not

make him out a jester with cap and bells, a poseur, a wit, and a fop, but a very sincere and serious artist stung to resentment by the stupidity and studied insults of a perverse generation. That is precisely the right point of view, but unfortunately the Pennells are about the only ones who have consistently held it. The other accounts, for the most part, deal with his personal appearance, his witticisms, his eccentricities, his quarrels, and let his art go with a few rhapsodic generalities.

As for the descriptions of Whistler's personality, they give a false impression by undue emphasis on certain appearances. My acquaintance with him was after 1890, though I had met him some years before. At no time was I impressed with his "flashing" eye, or his "claw-like" hands, or his "white lock," or his "dandified" costume. They were not marked features unless one were looking for them. He was slightly built, refined-looking, and carried himself well, even gracefully. The Chase portrait of him is so foolish that even Chase could not show it without apologies and explanations; and as for the Boldini portrait, it is thoroughly Mephistophelian. About the latter, Whistler said: "They say that looks like me; but I hope I don't look like that." The portrait is a typical Boldini, with all that that implies of vulgarity and insinuation. But Whistler looked like a gentleman, not like a *boulevardier*.



His manner was courteous and his disposition usually good-natured. I never saw anything of his waspishness, nor heard any of his vitriolic retorts. He talked soberly and very sensibly unless aroused or driven into a corner by argument. Then he would fight back viciously enough and with excellent wit. From some quick answers to foolish people he finally became known for repartee and his name was used as a peg upon which many sharp sayings were hung, and he quite innocent of them. The only bright retort from him that I ever heard was made at my own expense. I recount it as illustrative of his brightness.

One night at the Pennells', Whistler had been grumbling in an amusing way over art criticism and art critics. No one answered him. He had the floor entirely to himself and the rest of us were content to smile. Near eleven o'clock, as I rose to go, and Whistler and Pennell went with me to the door, I ventured to say that art critics were not very different from other people, that they did the best they could, but were human and often erred. It was good-natured deprecation of his point of view, which he met by putting his hand on my shoulder and saying with equal good nature:

"Oh, my dear Van Dyke, don't misunderstand. We none of us think of you as an art critic." Everybody laughed, myself included. There was not a particle of venom in it. I had

written about him in praise in the early eighties when others were abusing him and he had thanked me for it; I was in his good books. To be sure, the retort was hardly new. John Brougham had launched it at Lester Wallack many years before. But the cleverness of it lay in its application.

Whistler liked to talk, especially if there was an audience of half a dozen. He was then very willing to fill space in the spot-light and conduct the session, especially if art was up for discussion. Another night, at a Pennell dinner, a very clever man—one of the editors of the *Daily Telegraph*—was present. He had recently returned from the far North—beyond Spitzbergen—and had been telling us about the brilliancy of the Northern color. Whistler, beside whom I sat, was not interested and kept tugging at my arm, telling me that it was mere raw color and not art. To that I finally had to make reply that I cared not a rap whether the color was artistic or not, that I was interested in the mere fact of its brilliancy. With that he flung around in his chair, turning his back on me, much as a child might do, and remained silent until the subject changed.

But it is an error to infer that because he was often witty and occasionally petty, wit and pettishness were his outstanding characteristics. By setting forth unrelieved chapters of his stories and sayings the impression has been produced that he started a new quarrel each

morning before breakfast and shot envenomed shafts until sunset. That his witticisms were scattered over a period of forty years is neither stated nor implied. As a matter of fact, he was almost always in a serious mood, and, with his knowledge and gift of language, talked most sensibly and persuasively. I remember many interesting and informing talks with him when there was no jesting and not even smiling. In his own studio, with his own pictures on the easel and he explaining his intention and its development on the canvas, he was at his best. He was then a reasonable, sensible painter, with none of the pose of the *Ten O'Clock* and none of the vanity of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. I have never met a more striking contradiction in an individual, and it always seemed to me that the Whistler of the sharp tongue and pen was not the true Whistler but merely a character assumed for the occasion.

His published writings, as one reads them to-day, are extravagantly brilliant, but hardly sincere, even from a Whistlerian point of view. Take from the *Ten O'Clock*, for instance, the oft-quoted sentence: "There never was an artistic period, there never was an art-loving nation." A measure of truth lies under that, but Whistler knew that he exaggerated it, overstated it. Again the statement that "Art happens—no hovel is safe from it, no prince may depend upon it, the vastest intelligence cannot bring it about, and



puny efforts to make it universal end in quaint comedy and coarse farce." Here is another half-truth, but so arbitrarily insisted upon that one infers that art is really an isolated and unrelated phenomenon on the earth. Whistler knew better than that. Nothing "happens" in this world. There is a cause for every effect. Once more the remark about "the unlimited admiration daily produced by a very foolish sunset." But he himself never was so foolish as to believe such nonsense. It was merely a rococo way of saying that art could not handle a sunset in a satisfactory manner, and that his art, in particular, preferred a twilight or a midnight. The *Ten O'Clock* indeed explains Whistler's art better than any other, and, of course, that was why it was written. His own limitations and necessities could not have been better set forth than by the sentence: "Nature is very rarely right; to such an extent even, that it might almost be said that nature is usually wrong." He wanted to put a conventionalized nature into a decorative pattern, and he justified it by saying that a realistic nature is "usually wrong." It is somewhat of a piece with his remark that "there are too many trees in the country." There were—for Whistler's art.

But it is useless to point out the superficial in the Whistler arguments—the falseness of analogy, for instance, in comparing national art with national mathematics. That statement was

made to produce a laugh, and it succeeded. It is even stupid to point out the want of logic or historical truth in the *Ten O'Clock*. One might as well try to break Whistler's own butterfly on a wheel. The lecture was written and delivered to astonish the natives. And it did. It was a charming bit of extravagance, beautifully written for platform delivery, and a delightful piece of literature for fireside reading. Had it been logical, temperate, well-guarded in its utterances, it would have fallen flat. It fitted the occasion, was a work of art in itself, and no more "happened" than Whistler's pictures and etchings.

That he wrote extremely well makes it all the more unfortunate that he wrote at all. The letters of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* are amusing, but leave an impression of flippancy and mere cleverness. These were qualities rightly enough used in a rough-and-tumble newspaper quarrel, but the reader does not leave them there. Unwittingly he looks for the same qualities in Whistler's portraits and pastels, perhaps reads them into the art itself. Worse yet, he possibly arrives at the conclusion that the art is of less interest than the quarrels, of less moment than the passing gibe of the "foolish sunset," or the casual irrelevance of "dragging in Velasquez." Once more, it is a pity that Whistler the painter has to be confused with Whistler the critic-baiter. However well one comes out

of a fight, it is generally with ruffled plumage and a lack of dignity. Whistler could well have afforded to go his way in silence. Why did he have to kick at every cur that barked at his heels? Degas said he acted as though he had no talent, and Degas was right.

After these books of bickerings one comes back to Whistler's pictures with relief, for they at least are serious. That is not, however, to say that they are the greatest this, or the most wonderful that, in all painting. They are far from being impeccable, but they are not the wherewithal to suckle fools and chronicle small beer. No competent person nowadays thinks them other than very sincere art. His brothers of the craft have, indeed, so elevated them and him, so pedestalled and niched them both, that it is very doubtful if they can long hold out in their rarefied atmosphere. Again and again has the world been told that he was a faultless draftsman, that his brush was equal to that of Velasquez, and that his needle outdid Rembrandt. He did not believe so himself, nor, soberly considered, does his art affirm it.

The Pennell book contains photographs of a number of pictures labelled "destroyed," and there were scores of canvases that never got so far as even to be photographed. Many of the pictures that escaped destruction are faulty in drawing, lacking in construction, out of proportion, or smitten with stiffness in the joints.



Connie Gilchrist on the stage skipped the rope delightfully, but in Whistler's portrait called "The Gold Girl" she is petrified. The "Sarasate" seems pinched in scale, the "Irving as Philip" is unbelievable in construction, the "Leyland" legs had to be redrawn from a model. Whistler glorified the people of Velasquez because "they stand upon their legs." In his studio, showing his own portraits, his first question about each figure was: "How does it stand?" And then: "Does it stand easily, stand firm, stand in? Is it placed right on the canvas, has it enough body, enough atmospheric setting?" These were questions that had to do with realistic or representative appearance. Again and again he rubbed out the whole day's work or destroyed the picture entirely. And he could write of himself to his printer in the severest terms, thus: "No, my drawing or sketch or whatever you choose, is damnable and no more like the superb original than if it had been done by the worst and most incompetent enemy. . . . There must be no record of this abomination."

This, in measure, is the experience of every artist. He produces with difficulty and has scores of failures. It was not to Whistler's discredit that he was so severe a judge of himself, but perhaps it dispels the delusion of his being an impeccable craftsman. Besides, there was an unusual reason for his lack of success with many pictures. It has been already suggested that he

strove to harmonize the conflicting traditions of the West and the East. He was born and bred to the realism of the third dimension—to the protrusion or recession in space of planes, figures, lights, and colors. Midway in his career he took up with the decorative in Eastern art and strove to show the representative figure of the French with the flattened formula of the Japanese.

Whistler was thus on a seesaw the greater part of his artistic life, trying to maintain a balance between these two formulas. With almost every picture it was too much realism or too much decoration. To make the union more perfect he began the remorseless cutting down of the subject, reaching a limit in his nocturnes which were finally reduced to little more than night-sky effects. He cut out modelling and outline until the portrait of "Mrs. Leyland" became a mere tonal scheme, as flat almost as the wall at the back. Light, too, was dimmed and color lost its brilliancy in a prevailing harmony of low tones. Finally, the brush which had been heavily loaded in his Courbet days and ran freely (as witness the dress patterns even in the later "Lange Leizen") became thin, watery, absorbent, almost diaphanous in its feathery imperceptible touch. On top of all this, and to further blend the representative into the decorative and draw the picture together, there occasionally came a thin wash of transparent

gray or brown, covering the whole canvas and binding the drawing, the light, the color into one tonal envelope. In the final analysis, the canvas was rightly enough called an arrangement, a harmony, a symphony, a nocturne—what you will. Anything else was merely suggestion.

The etchings were not so amenable to Japanese pattern as the paintings, water-colors, and pastels, yet even in them there was the disposition, not so much toward flattening the planes as eliminating details, making suggestion answer for realization, and, later on, the further attempt to produce a tone effect by small scratchings and hatchings on the plate. The inclination is perhaps better shown in his lithotints, such as that of "The Thames" (Lithotint W. 125), than in the etchings.

The decorative arrangement was his view of what art should be and was more or less manifested in everything he did. Even the *Ten O'Clock* is more decorative than realistic. The arrangement of the sentences and paragraphs is charming, and whether they mean anything or not is of small importance. Of course Whistler would have objected to being thus hung by his own rope, but he deliberately subordinated the sense of his sentences to their rhythm and tone. People who write (even art critics) are aware of what constitutes pattern and color in words and they are well pleased that the *Ten O'Clock* was not representative but just as it is—that is,



decorative and delightful. The painter people, however, seem to regard it as the inspired gospel of art and every word of it true. From which one may infer that the artist, when outside of his *métier*, can look at the wrong thing with that persistence sometimes thought peculiar to the unattached writer.

In the final analysis Whistler's fame must rest upon his pictures, though a certain amount of notoriety will probably always be given his sayings and a proper admiration accompany his writings. As a painter and an etcher he has a now-unquestioned place and he will hold it. Nothing in nineteenth-century art is quite of a kind with his. It stands alone in its aim and purpose, belongs to no art movement of the time, proclaims the ideals of no race or people. As for the usual motives of painting, Whistler scorned them or denied them. He cared nothing about classicism or romanticism, nothing about sentiment, feeling, passion, or action. The dramatic, the tragic, the domestic, the illustrative were foreign to him. Even nature put him out. The country bored him, and the sea was only so much blue paint in a pattern. He was a maker of beautiful schemes of color and line, with just enough of human interest about them to lend a meaning and occasionally a touch of intimacy.

That seems like reducing his art to a very simple affair, but, on the contrary, within the self-imposed limitations there was room for the

greatest variety. He did portraits, figures, genre pieces, sea-pieces, river-views; he worked in oils, water-colors, pastels; he etched many plates that are to-day the joy of connoisseurs, and he vastly improved the almost forgotten art of lithography. The breadth of his accomplishment was wide and the excellence of it high. Nothing that he ever did but has some note of color, some wave of line, some fastidious arrangement or grouping that serves as a mark of distinction. He did hundreds of pastels and water-colors no larger than one's hand, that contain lovely figures and draperies, as, for example, the "Annabel Lee"; or gave suggestions of the sea or shore akin to "The Blue Wave," or spread sky patterns comparable to the "Battersea Bridge." These pictures are now widely scattered, and one does not realize how truly decorative their planning until he meets them to-day, hanging singly or in pairs, in some drawing-room. There they put other modern work out of countenance by the way they do not "break through the wall" but enhance and beautify it. It is household art of a most distinguished character in that it goes in the household and takes its place without quarrelling with everything about it. I have already quoted La Farge to the effect that in using the word "decorative" he was saying the best thing he could about a picture. There he and Whistler were in perfect agreement.

The deriding of Whistler was not indulged in

by press and public alone. The painter people—the inspired ones, who by reason of their calling are the only ones competent to judge of art—stoned him, too. Royal academicians dealt him harder knocks than plebeian critics. But he always had a following of his own, and before he died the following had grown into a procession. Since his death his influence has been more far-reaching than that of any modern. His pictures were not only adopted, assimilated, imitated in England and France but all over Europe. Here in America the exhibitions still show his color schemes and arrangements as comprehended by his admiring young converts. Without taking on pupils, as Couture and Gleyre had done, he nevertheless became far more of a *chef d'Ecole* than either of them. That is what he would have called perhaps handing on the tradition. He believed that he himself was an inheritor and a transmitter—one of the links in the great art chain.

But it was not the American tradition that Whistler handed on. We claim him as one of us because he was born here, but his art does not represent us in any way. His Thames nocturnes are not those of the Hudson, his portraits are not of our people, and his decorative patterns never were seen in American life or art. He handed on the blended traditions of Gleyre and Hiroshige, not the legend of Copley and Stuart and Durand. That may be matter for regret in



history but it surely is not to be regretted in art. For Whistler gave us a new and a beautiful point of view in painting. Realist, idealist, impressionist, cubist, futurist—none of the terms describe him or even suggest his work. As an artist he was unique, and his art, instead of reproducing a species, stemmed out into a new variety of surpassing loveliness and beauty. We would not be without it. We are not sure that its “name and fame will live forever,” as the Pennells put it, but it will live.



VIII

WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE





## VIII

### WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE

A DISTRIBUTION and pigeonholing of our nine American painters as regards aim and tendency would perhaps place Inness, Wyant, and Martin among the most intelligent and sympathetic of the earlier men; Homer, La Farge, and Whistler the most detached and self-sufficient of the middle men, and Chase, Alexander, and Sargent the most facile and best trained of the younger men. The last three may, indeed, stand as epitomizing the art movement which took form and gave tongue in the Society of American Artists.

That movement was epoch-making. There was awakening to the fact that painting in America as a craft was not technically understood, that it was not properly taught—could not be taught in America. With that came the departure for Europe of many young students and their training in the studios of Munich and Paris. When the Society of American Artists finally got under way in the early eighties its initial reason for existence was that its members at least knew how to paint. They had been abroad and learned the grammar of their art and were now returned to show their countrymen the finished crafts-

man. Sargent's influence was largely through the example of his portraits and Alexander's vogue was to come a little later; but Chase was the one that arrived early in the day, carried the banner, and announced that art had come to town.

All three of these men grounded themselves in technical method which seemed the necessity of the hour, and all three of them have remained so bedded in method that their art has rarely risen above it or beyond it. Chase, more radical than the others, proclaimed his belief that method was art itself and that a brilliant, dashing manner took precedence over matter. He would not admit that art was more than a surface expression. His belief was, of course, properly adjusted to his own mental equipment. He and Whistler, with many another artist, could cleverly compound for qualities

“they were inclined to  
By damning those they had no mind to.”

Unconsciously, no doubt, every one's tendency is to regard his own limitations as self-imposed and his work right in kind if not in degree. Perhaps that is what Chase meant in a talk at the National Arts Club some years ago when he said: “They say I am conceited. I don't deny it. I believe in myself. I do and I must.” As philosophy that may not be very profound but as a working faith, paint-brush in hand, it is superb.



With such faith and purpose Chase produced scores of pictures that showed his declared point of view, and trained hundreds of pupils not only in his enthusiasm but in his own crisp, clean handling. He was a painter from beginning to end, and exemplified the aim and carry of the Society of American Artists better than any one artist of his time.

He came out of the near West, having been born in Williamsburg, Indiana, in 1849. The village was a small one, less than two hundred inhabitants when Chase was a boy, and what elementary schooling he received there may be imagined. His parents were Indiana people, and the home influence probably did not incline him to art. He saw illustrations in magazines and books and that put the childish wish in his head to "make pictures for books." He drew with colored pencils, had the little water-color cubes known to all children, and soon made a local reputation among schoolmates and family friends for drawing portraits. At twelve his parents moved to Indianapolis, and at sixteen he entered his father's shoe-store as a clerk. The biographies of painters\* almost always afford such incidents as these. They are supposed to indicate genius trying to orient itself, but perhaps they are no more than vacillations of the youthful mind. At that time Chase had not

\* There is an excellent biography of Chase—*The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase*, by Katharine Metcalf Roof, New York, 1917.

definitely decided upon art as a career. At nineteen he thought to be some day a naval officer. As a preliminary step he enlisted as a sailor at Annapolis, and was assigned to the training-ship *Portsmouth*. He probably did not know what else to do and it was an adventure at least; but he soon discovered that it was also a mistake. His father got him out of it and together they went back to the family shoe-shop in Indianapolis.

There was some more experimental portraiture, with members of the household and the family calf as models, and then Chase was sent to a local painter by the name of Benjamin Hayes, who accepted him as a pupil. Art definitely began for him then and there. He was with Hayes several months—long enough to take a studio and set up as a painter on his own account. At twenty he went to New York with a letter to J. O. Eaton, whose pupil he became and with whom he remained for two years. He seems to have had an early liking for independent quarters, for while a student in New York he set up another studio in Twenty-third Street. After his two years with Eaton he once more went back to the paternal roof, then in St. Louis. Here he occupied a studio with J. W. Pattison, and for a year painted pictures, principally pictures of still-life. Then he happened to see a picture by John Mulvaney, and that gave him the idea of going abroad for study.

Some St. Louis patrons advanced money to him and he went to Munich—a city at that time perhaps more frequented by art students than Paris. Duveneck, Dielman, Currier, Shirlaw were there, and Chase at once entered into the student life of the city. He was enrolled in the school of the Munich Royal Academy, with Kaulbach at its head, and he was also a student under Piloty; but the outside influence of Leibl was potent upon all the Munich students at that time, Chase included. In addition he studied to his profit the old masters in the Alte Pinacothek, especially Van Dyck, and was susceptible to impressions from Duveneck and perhaps Habermann, a German student friend. Some years ago in a European retrospective exhibition I was struck by a Habermann portrait that was practically a duplicate of Chase's "Ready for the Ride," but whether it was Chase following Habermann or Habermann following Chase, I could not determine.

With his various activities Chase cut quite a figure in the student world of Munich and was regarded as a coming man. He won competitions, painted Piloty's children, painted "The Turkish Page," the Duveneck portrait called "The Smoker," "The Jester," "The Dowager," "The Apprentice Boy," "The Broken Jug," and other works. A chance to review some of these pictures was recently afforded at the Panama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco,



where Chase was represented by a roomful of pictures, and many people were astonished to find how very solidly and beautifully painted were these early examples. They were, of course, dark in illumination with some bitumen in the shadows. It was studio light, not *plein air* that Munich taught. It took Chase a number of years to arrive at a higher key of light, but in other matters of technique he had become something of a master before leaving Munich—so much so that he was asked to remain as an instructor in the Bavarian Academy. He declined, however, and in 1877 went to Venice, where he joined Duveneck and Twachtman and remained for nearly a year.

Venice meant not a great deal to Chase. He painted it, but in the formal Munich manner, and with little of the local light or color of the place. While there he fell upon hard times, was in financial straits, and became ill, possibly as the result of privations. But he continued painting, and, what is more astonishing, while in dire poverty he began collecting all sorts of artistic plunder. This was the beginning of a taste that he indulged in all his life. He bought pictures, rugs, brocades, silks, brass, guns, swords, jewels, rings—anything that was beautiful or artistic in design or color. At different times he had large collections of antiquities, and was ever hunting for more. At Venice he added two monkeys to his possessions, and when a few months later he

returned to New York and took his Tenth Street studio he had several strange parrots and odd dogs as adjuncts to the place. The high walls of the big studio were hung with bits of tapestries, old velvets, pictures; the floor was covered with Oriental rugs; the tables were littered with clocks, pistols, old books, brass bowls; and the screens were draped with silks and brocades. It was the first "artistic" studio in New York.

This was in 1877 and Chase had returned to New York to become a teacher in the newly established Art Students League. That was the beginning of his long and very useful career as a teacher. The Art Students League and the Society of American Artists were started about the same time, the Metropolitan Museum having preceded them by a few years. The movement for art was under way and Chase had arrived at the psychological moment. Associated with Beckwith, Blum, Shirlaw, and others he immediately took a positive interest in current art matters. The big studio became the gathering-place of the young men, where resolutions were passed and committees were set in motion. Society also found its way there, for Chase gave Saturday receptions when the door with the vibrating lyre on the back of it was swung open by a colored servant in fez and gown, and pictures and antiquities were displayed and talked about by the painter himself. At other times dinners and dances were

given there, to which came many notables. People from the opera sang, Carmencita danced, and society people posed in picture-frames for the characters of Titian and Van Dyck. Chase had a decided vogue, social as well as artistic, almost from the very start.

As a painter he was taken seriously and received his meed of praise with few dissenting voices. Almost every one in the press and magazines hailed him as the much-needed person—the man who technically knew how to paint. His pictures at no time ever sold very well, but that was for the reason perhaps that they never possessed an intimate human interest, not because they were indifferently painted. On the whole, though some of the elders looked askance at his broad brushing, or thought his themes somewhat material and superficial, he had no grievance of a Whistler kind against either critic or public. The art clubs elected him to membership, he spent his first summer after his return in a trip through the Erie Canal with the Tile Club, in 1880 he became a member of the Society of American Artists, and in 1883 its president. The same year he had organized and sent to Munich the first group of American pictures for exhibition there.

A curiosity as to how art had been produced by other people, in other times and countries as well as our own, was always with Chase. He was a great traveller, a great student of art, a great



haunter of galleries and museums. In the thirty or more years that I knew him I had met him at different times in almost every gallery of Europe. Only a year or so before the Great War I was working in the Uffizi one hot July afternoon after every one had left the place. I had been alone for several hours when I heard steps approaching me down the long corridor. It was late and one of the attendants was probably coming to tell me it was time to close. But no; instead of that I heard in very good English:

“At it again, I see! At it again!”

I turned around to find Chase standing there. He, too, had stayed on in the heat after the crowd had gone, and had no doubt been prying into some Titian or questioning some Rembrandt or Rubens!

For many years he kept voyaging to Europe summer after summer. I never chanced to cross with him, but one spring, while bidding farewell to some friends who were sailing, I saw Chase jump out of a cab and scramble up the landing-stage—the last man to arrive—and still giving some directions over his shoulder to his colored man, who remained on the dock. On every steamer he sailed in he organized art, painted the cabin or smoke-room panels, sketched the captain, and made a portrait of the ship's beauty. Arrived in Europe, he went to see not only exhibitions and museums but brothers of the craft in their studios. He spoke no French,

Spanish, or Italian, and had only a limited vocabulary in German, but that made no difference. He got on better with Boldini and Alfred Stevens in Paris using the sign language than with Whistler in London exchanging biting English. Everywhere he was welcomed and treated as a man of distinction in his profession, and everywhere he saw something new and was perhaps influenced thereby.

He was eager to learn and susceptible to impression—so much so that he was said to have followed at different times Leibl, Stevens, Rico, Fortuny, Whistler; but the things which Chase followed were minor matters of handling or arrangement and did not affect his personal point of view. They were superficial fancies and were soon merged, fused, or abandoned. Some of the old masters, Velasquez, Titian, Hals, Rembrandt, had a stronger influence upon him, but these men he never tried to follow. It was their high artistic plane that gave him inspiration. Standing before Titian's "Young Englishman" in the Pitti, his admiration for its superb poise and lofty dignity was unbounded. It was faultless and flawless intellectually and technically. The left eye was out of drawing, but Titian intended it so. It gave the face more character. He never even wanted to suspect that the restorer in the cleaning-room was perhaps responsible for the bad drawing of the eye. Titian was above criticism.

Chase was never mean in his enthusiasms. He loved whole-heartedly. Before Velasquez at Madrid everything was just as it should be. He was the greatest of them all—the master craftsman of the craft; in the Louvre he protested that no one had ever equalled or approached such still-life painting as that of Chardin; at Haarlem he was just as unstinted in praise of Frans Hals. And he was right about them all. He was a very good judge of pictures and picked out no questionable masters for admiration. Where he found a great masterpiece in a gallery, there he unslung his kit, sat down, and made a copy. He at different times produced very remarkable copies of Velasquez, Hals, Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck, Ribera, Watteau. Whatever past art had to teach, Chase was eager to learn. He kept a receptive mind and a live interest in all phases of painting, and had more inherent knowledge of craftsmanship than any of his contemporaries. The literary history of art he knew nothing about, and probably could not have told within a hundred years when Velasquez or Hals was born. That side of art has small interest for artists, and for Chase it was more or less of a blank space.

His summer trips to Europe began in 1881, when he went to Paris and Madrid, making in the latter city a copy of the "Tapestry Weavers." The next year he was again in Spain with Blum and Vinton. At that time Madrid was a great



place for brass, pictures, stuffs, curios, and Chase bought without stint. He needed materials for still-life pictures and, besides, the big Tenth Street studio absorbed no end of furnishings. The summer of 1883 found him in Holland, living at Zandvoort with Blum, and painting Blum in a large garden-picture called "The Tiff." In 1885 he went to see Whistler in London. They started out on terms of mutual admiration, painted each other's portraits, travelled in Holland together, but finally ended up by quarrelling. The Whistler portrait of Chase has disappeared, or at least its whereabouts, if it still exists, is unknown; but the Chase portrait of Whistler is extant and now in the Metropolitan Museum. Whistler declared it "a monstrous lampoon," and he was about right in saying so. It is Whistler the *poseur*, not the real man. Certain eccentricities or personal peculiarities were so extravagantly presented that the characterization became little less than caricature.

In 1886 Chase was married to Miss Gerson and for a few years the European trips were abandoned. He was still teaching in the League, was president of the Society of American Artists, and was holding exhibitions of his work at the Boston Art Club and elsewhere. He began doing some open-air pastels in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. A small club called the "Painters in Pastel" had been organized in New York with Blum as president, and Chase, Beckwith, La Farge,

Twachtman, Weir, Wiles as members. Chase became interested in the gay color-possibilities of the medium and proceeded to apply it to park scenes with children, flowers, water, and trees. Years before, Alfred Stevens had told him that his Munich scheme of light was too dark and Chase immediately began to lighten it. Perhaps the medium of pastel finally drove out the last vestige of Munich, for certainly his open-air pictures, without suggesting *pointillisme* or impressionism or optical mixture of any kind, took on very light and brilliant colorings. They were charming expositions of color and sunlight, and were regarded at the time as something of a departure.

His works in oil measurably responded to the newly discovered brightness of his pastels, but they were always somewhat lower in key. Something of Munich method clung to his portraits even into the nineties. The "Lady in Black" (a portrait of Mrs. Leslie Cotton) in the Metropolitan Museum is an illustration to the point. It is excellent if somewhat sombre portraiture. Both Chase and Sargent painted Carmencita, the dancer, in 1890, Sargent's picture being now in the Luxembourg and Chase's in the Metropolitan Museum. The Chase shows very well his illumination, his color scheme, his drawing, and his brush-work at that time. Without radically changing them, he varied them from year to year to an extent that might almost be called

a new manner or style. He was always changing, as became a painter who counted his education as never complete while he lived.

He was widely known at this time through many pictures in annual exhibitions and by separate exhibitions of his works, as, for instance, that at Buffalo in 1891. The Academy of Design had overcome what prejudices against him it may have had and elected him to membership, he had started teaching in Brooklyn, and the same year his idea of a summer art school at Shinnecock, Long Island, came to realization. A house and studio, a class and a cottage colony were all started and completed out there in the sand-dunes by the sea, and one of the most picturesque art schools in America was soon under way. It was then and there that Chase did perhaps his best teaching and painted his best work not only in landscape, shore piece, and marine, but in portraiture, genre, and still-life. The portrait of his mother, done at Shinnecock, was almost certainly inspired by the fine early Rembrandt of an aged woman in the National Gallery, and yet there is hardly a line of resemblance that can be traced. The Chase portrait is very sober, serious, almost severe in its white cap and black silk dress. It has no flourish of brush nor flare of color, and, like the Whistler portrait of his mother, seems to have more fine feeling about it than any other portrait of his that comes to mind. This, one can imagine,



came about in both cases because the subjects were intimately known to the painters, and their appearances had been under long reflection before either painter put brush to canvas.

It was perhaps a shortcoming of Chase's art that he insisted upon merely seeing his subject and not thinking about it. The appearance to him was everything, the reflection or thought about it nothing. Yet the pictures of his that people like best are the ones where some thinking was done. The mother portrait is the instance just given, and better still than that perhaps is the "Woman with a White Shawl," now in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The latter is beautifully drawn and painted, rightly placed on the canvas, true in values, technically as nearly right as anything Chase ever did, but, oddly enough, one does not think of it technically nor regard it at first decoratively. It is the fine humanity of it—the eternal womanly—that catches the fancy. It is the portrait of a sensitive, refined American woman—in a way the ideal of a type that every American has seen or at some time has known about. Chase, with all his talk about dealing with surfaces only, sometimes talked the other way and expanded on character. He knew the paint-brush could go beneath the surface, for his own brush occasionally brought up astonishing results. The "Woman with a White Shawl" in its fine sympathy and inherent refinement of char-

acter may be regarded as Chase's high-water mark in portraiture. His portraits of men like those of Louis Windmuller, Dean Grosvenor, Robert Underwood Johnson, hardly reach up to it. They lack interest.

At the same time with the "Woman with a White Shawl" he did the "Alice," now in the Chicago Art Institute—a young girl with a ribbon thrown back of her shoulders almost like a skipping-rope. But this is just the ordinary Chase—that is, an excellent and well-drawn and rightly painted girl of twelve moving across the room with a smiling, somewhat unintelligent, face. The only thinking that Chase put in this picture was in regard to the action or movement of the figure. The rest was merely so much still-life painted for its surface texture as one might paint a brass bucket or the scales of a fish. And yet the "Alice" is an excellent picture and exhibits Chase's theory of art quite perfectly. But it also demonstrates the truth that the sum of art does not lie on the surface, that the model alone is possibly not sufficient in itself to make up the highest kind of pictorial beauty, and that the intellectual and emotional nature of the painter is a potent factor in all great art. Chase at heart knew that. Titian's portraits had convinced him of it years before.

Honors, prizes, and medals were coming to him, his teaching was very successful, he had a large following, and was thought the most



"The Woman with the White Shawl," by William Merritt Chase.

In the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.





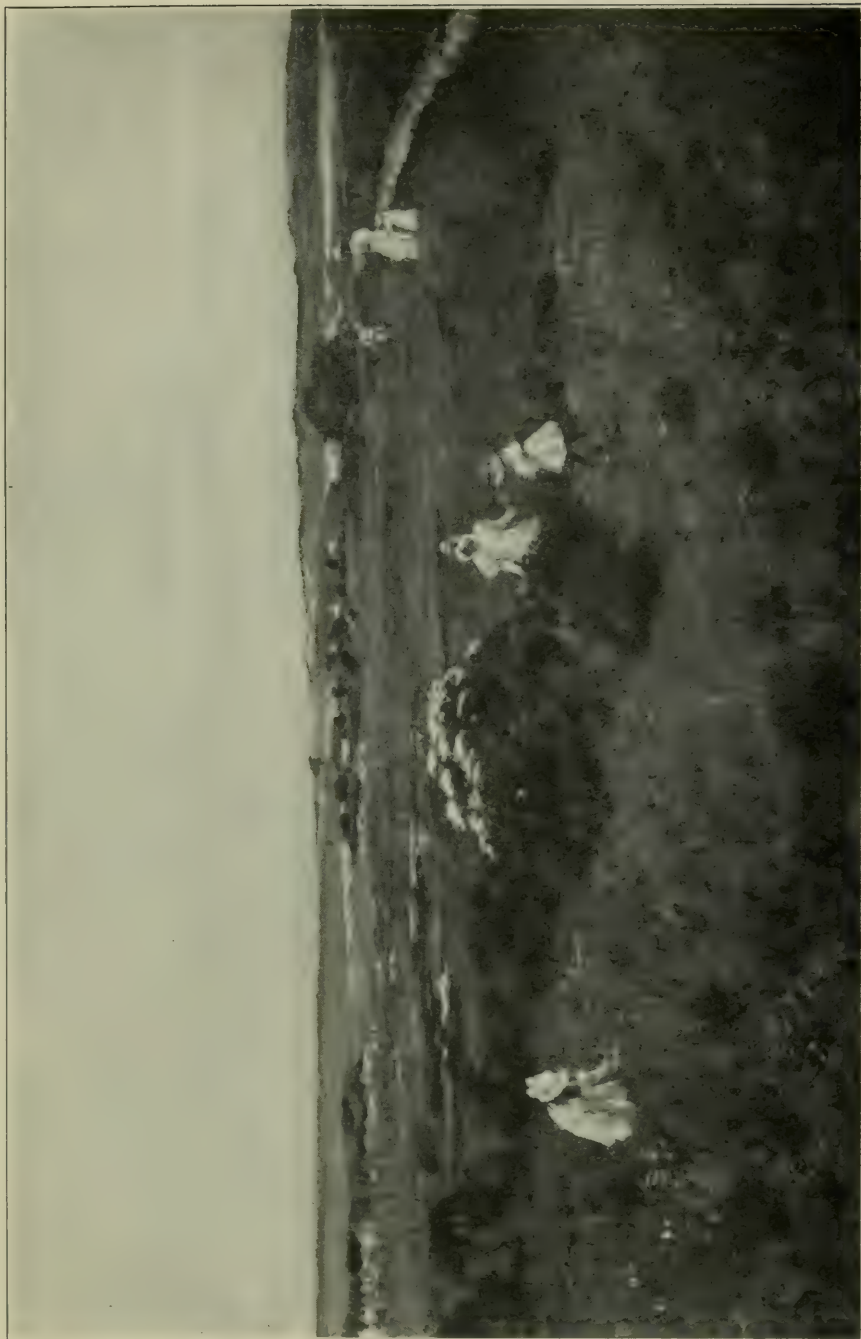
considerable of our art leaders; but beneath the surface all was not so placid or so pleasant. In 1895 he was no longer president of the Society, he gave up his Brooklyn class, and also his Tenth Street studio. Artistic extravagance or want of revenue or some other financial disability had placed him in straitened circumstances. All of his pictures and collections had to be sold to pay his debts. With characteristic indifference he gave a farewell dinner in the big studio before leaving it, gathered together what possessions remained to him in a house in Stuyvesant Square, and shortly thereafter, with his family and a number of pupils, went to Spain.

In June he returned to Shinnecock, and in the autumn took a studio at Fifth Avenue and Thirtieth Street, and opened at Fifty-seventh Street the Chase School. This school soon became the New York School of Art, and Chase was at its head for eleven years. He also went on teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, going over to Philadelphia every week for the purpose. Then for half a dozen years he taught and painted at Shinnecock with little travel interspersed. It was during these years that he did the "Grey Kimono" and the "Red Box," portraits arranged with Japanese accessories that showed brilliant coloring, swift handling, and rather superficial characterization. There was none of the Japanese spirit or even method about them. Then, too, he did many

shore pieces and views of the sea with the Shinnecock dunes in the foreground. In these pictures he often placed in the first plane small children in white, with a note of color in hats or ribbons, or a reading woman with a bright parasol. The bright spots of color lent brilliancy of effect and the white dresses gave a high pitch of light. They were very attractive pictures, and some of the seas put in the backgrounds had notes of power about them; but usually the product was merely a handsome decorative pattern—just what the painter intended it should be.

Occasionally, too, while at Shinnecock, Chase painted views of the sea, unadorned or unalloyed by beach or shore or people, that were very effective in wave movement and color. He had a finer feeling for color and texture than Winslow Homer but he never had Homer's grasp of power. In his studio at Shinnecock he painted portraits, genre, and still-life—some of the last being fish. Here, in still-life, with his cunning handling and with color and texture as the chief motive, he appeared to great advantage. By many people his fish-painting is regarded as his highest achievement. In no less than half a dozen museums in the United States he is represented by still-life pictures in which the bulk, the weight, the limpness of dead fish are convincingly shown, but where perhaps greater emphasis is thrown on the slippery wet





“Afternoon at Peconic,” by William Merritt Chase.



surfaces with their iridescent colorings. A few years before he died, in showing a new fish-picture in his studio he remarked to me with some deprecation in his manner that he supposed after he was gone he would be known as a fish-painter! He had made the same protest to others.

A short trip to London was taken in 1902. His pupils had asked him to sit to Sargent for his portrait and he did so. The portrait was afterward given to the Metropolitan Museum, where it now hangs. Chase greatly admired Sargent's sureness and facility and often referred his students to Sargent's portraits for their study. He was always generous in recognition of good work, even where perhaps he did not like the worker's point of view, as with Boldini, for example. Sargent and Boldini could outfoot him on his own ground, but that did not matter. He could still cheer for them.

It was during 1902 that Chase conceived the remarkable idea of not only going to Europe himself for the summer months but taking with him his entire class of students. The first contingent went with him to Holland, and at Haarlem one night at dinner he gave me an account of the venture and its success. His pupils had not only profited by foreign scene and museum but he had taken them to see certain well-known painters in their studios and shown them the modern methods of painting. The next year



he took the class to England, located it on Hampstead Heath, and introduced it at the studios of Sargent, Abbey, Lavery, Alma-Tadema, Shannon. The year of 1905 the class was in Madrid and after that for a number of years in Florence. Chase bought a villa in Florence, but apparently it was little more than a storehouse for objects of art which he was still collecting. He spent much time at Venice, and both there and at Florence would take his pupils to the great galleries and point out to them what was excellent in the old masters. It was a new method of art teaching and satisfactory results came from it.

Chase's winters had been spent in New York and he kept moving in both his habitations and his occupations. He left the Fifth Avenue studio for a large rambling place on Fourth Avenue, where rooms opened into rooms, and where he continued painting people and fish. He again took up teaching at the Art Students League, sent pictures to the International Exhibition at Berlin, held an exhibition of his own at Cincinnati, went to California where he had a summer school at Carmel-by-the-Sea, served as a member of the Panama-Pacific Exposition jury. His energy and his interest were unflagging. He painted and taught and talked, he came and went and came again, as no other painter in American art-history. His industry alone would command respect. Even when he fell into his final illness and was taken to Atlantic City for change of

air he had canvases and brushes packed and sent with him. He might be able to paint down there. At the last, when too weak to read, it pleased him to go over, with his wife, all the beautiful pictures they had seen together and compare their likings. His enthusiasm was always something to be remembered; and when in October, 1916, he died, there was a pronounced feeling in art circles that not only a torch-bearer, but a devoted lover of art had gone on.

There was nothing complicated or hidden or mysterious about either Chase or his art. He frankly stated his aim, faith, and practice more than once and adhered to his beliefs for more than forty years. He cared nothing about theories or philosophies or ideals and was not led off by realism, impressionism, or cubism. He talked much on art, not only to his classes but to miscellaneous audiences; but he indulged in no metaphysical flights and spoke a language that all could understand. As a practical painter his primary concern was with the ability to paint. The picture should be technically and mechanically a good piece of workmanship. The grammar of art first, and what you may have to say with it afterward. At times he intimated that things, by no means technical, could be said with the paint-brush, as, for example, this utterance: "The value of a work of art depends simply and solely on the height of inspiration, on the great-

ness of soul, of the man who produced it." But, generally speaking, Chase cared not too much for "soul" in art and produced little of it in his own pictures. His creed of painting was better stated in another sentence. "The essential phases of a great picture are three in number, namely: truth, interesting treatment, and quality." By truth he meant that the picture should give the impression of a thing well seen. By interesting treatment he meant verve, spirit, enthusiasm, the interest of the artist—an interest which should express itself in his manner of treatment. Regarding this he continued:

"To my mind, one of the simplest explanations of this matter of technique is to say that it is the eloquence of art. When a speaker has the gift of fine oratory we hang upon his words and gestures, we are spellbound by his intensity and his style, no matter on what subject he chooses to address us. I fear some people confuse technique with the use of a slashing brush and big rough strokes of paint. Let me refer them to the works of the Primitives or to Holbein, whose calm surfaces show us one of the world's greatest masters of the technical side of art." \*

It will be noted that Chase in his pertinent likeness of painting to oratory eliminates the content or thing said and puts the art and the oratory all in the manner of saying. And therein

\* "Notes from Talks by William M. Chase" in *The American Magazine of Art*, September, 1917.



he is perhaps right so far as the matter can be separated from the manner. He puts the subject aside as one might say there is no poetry in Darwin, nothing æsthetic or artistic, though he says much of great value, whereas there is poetry in Swinburne though it is often difficult to find out whether he is saying anything at all or merely putting out a pretty run or rhythm of language. It was a pretty run of the brush that Chase fancied above everything else.

“Subject is not important. Anything can be made attractive. Not long ago I painted a pipe, a loaf, and a bowl of milk. . . . I would not be unwilling to rest my reputation on it. . . . Let your brush sweep freely. Better to lose it than to give way to timidity which soon becomes a habit. . . . Better be dashingly bad and interesting.”\*

It was thus he talked to his pupils trying to convince them that art lay in an enthusiastic individual manner. He believed that—believed that the art of painting lay in clever manipulation, in gusto, in manual dexterity. But that did not mean a slashing about at haphazard with a heavily loaded brush.

“Too many are hurrying on to give what is called ‘finish’ before they have grounded their work in the truth which must inform and uphold the entire structure. . . . Digest the subject fully before beginning. See it fully done and

\* *Ibid.*

well done—perhaps as some special painter whose work you admire would do it. To begin to paint without deciding fully what your sketch is to be, would be like a lecturer beginning to talk before knowing what he was going to say.”\*

Now that is excellent doctrine and Chase himself followed it in his own practice. In 1890 I sat to him for a portrait and I recall his saying then before he put brush to the canvas: “I try to see you on the canvas all finished and then I start in to paint you as I see you in my mind.” Later on in the painting he was fussed by the collar being askew; he damned it, said it was not rightly seen or drawn, scraped it out and did it over again. He was concerned about getting a certain amount of realistic truth as well as easy brush-work, and talked much about the right seeing of the model. But there was a contradiction in temperament just here that came in to invalidate his aim only too often.

Enthusiasm is usually impatient of delay or restraint; it is always eager for action. Yet one cannot fully understand even so obvious an object as the model on the stand without reflection. It must be seen and thought over and contemplated before one takes up the brush. Nothing very great comes from dashing down on canvas something seen for an instant only. But Chase, in spite of his talk, was not one who reflected long or had the contemplative mind. He seldom

\* *Ibid.*

fell into a reverie or lost himself in a labyrinth of thought. He had virtuosity and was an *improvisateur*. The lilt and fling of his work were brilliant in the extreme; and it is perhaps foolish to criticise it because lacking in thought or reflection, and yet that is the comment oftenest heard regarding it. His pictures are declared to have neither depth of feeling nor depth of thought, and the works that are accounted his best are the exceptions that prove the rule.

It has been noted also that Chase's paintings were never very elaborate in composition. He did nothing of a historical or academic nature—nothing even in figure-painting beyond two or three figures. Putting figures together with line and light, in plane and pattern, perhaps called for too much reflection. It was easier to place a model in a kimono against a screen or to arrange a fish in a plate or on a table, or to put together a pipe, a loaf, and a bowl. He was in a hurry to get at the canvas, and wanted none of the enthusiasm to evaporate. Just so with his color scheme. He would not think over it until he could feel it swell like a symphony, but instead put in unconsidered colors that were perhaps agreeable enough in themselves, and then added a dash of sharp red to catch the eye and make the picture "sing." But it was usually a common enough song that it sang. Distinction of color is not obtained by merely arranging studio properties on canvas.



Some instinct and a good deal of feeling go to the making of the finest color projects. So, again, we find that perhaps the common objection to Chase's color that it has no quality is more or less well-founded.

He knew how to draw, for he had a severe enough schooling at Munich, but in later life he oftentimes ran over drawing, hid it under that easy brush-stroke which he liked so much and which he usually handled so effectively. Sometimes it went astray. It was not the premeditated sweep of Rubens or the infallible touch of Velasquez. It was more like Goya or Stevens or Vollon—painters whose brushes were not always impeccable. However, the brush of Chase was sure enough, and with its spirit and swift movement it certainly gave that oratorical effect to which he compared painting. It is vivacious and with its facility creates the feeling of knowledge and mastery. That was something achieved at least. A surface by Chase usually shows that a skilled workman has left his mark upon it.

His idea about quality in art was that it came: "As a result of perfect balance of all the parts and may be manifested in a color or tone or composition. In the greatest pictures it is found in all three, and then you may be sure you are before the most consummate of human works."\*

The definition is not a good one, and he apolo-

\* *Ibid.*



"Child Dancing," by William Merritt Chase.





gized for his inability to define quality by saying that it is like trying to "tell the difference between music and mere sound." But quality is not precisely either melody or harmony, though it *is* the difference between music and mere sound. It is the difference also between silk and gingham, between an air blue and a baby-blue, between a luminous shadow and gray paint, between a forceful, telling line and a halting, rambling one. Quality is the badge of distinction—that something which puts a *cachet* of authority upon a work of art and places it among the masterpieces of all time. Did Chase have it? Yes, occasionally. Such works as the "Woman with a White Shawl" possess it. From which it may be inferred that quality is more or less dependent upon thinking, reflection, mood—things which were not always apparent in Chase's art.

Yet he did much thinking along certain paths and had something very important to say to his age and generation about sound technique, good workmanship. In a literary or illustrative sense he recorded no more romance, history, passion, power, or pathos than Whistler. He told no story in paint, indulged in no dramatic climaxes, was guiltless of emotion, and perhaps incapable of poetry. He was a workman, a consummate craftsman in a goldsmith sense, and he did his thinking about his work, put his storm and stress and soul into his palette and brush. As a workman he was distinguished by a manner of his own

which is sometimes referred to as his style—his individual style. His method, rather than his style, he passed on to his pupils, and his influence upon them was perhaps greater than upon the community at large. He taught more young people how to handle a brush than any painter of any time, not excepting Rubens. Several thousand pupils came under his influence, were stimulated by his enthusiasm, and encouraged by his words. He was an excellent teacher, and American art is perhaps more beholden to him for what he taught than for the things he painted.

For the pupils now carry on the teaching, and perhaps from them may come a greater and a loftier art than Chase himself was able to produce. The force of good teaching is cumulative and eventually it develops into that body of belief and practice which I have called tradition. Chase, like Whistler, was not an inheritor of any American tradition, but he established one of his own and passed it on to his followers. He based his pupils in good technical workmanship and taught the fundamental value of craftsmanship. It was a teaching badly needed in his America; he gave it importance and place in the schools and became, perhaps without his knowing it, a master leader in the craft.

Chase's painting is the concrete embodiment of his teaching—the illustration of it. It has the obvious limitations of his method and belief. To pass it by because it has not the romance of

a Ryder or the poetry of a Martin or the significance of a La Farge is to miss its meaning entirely. He is just as frankly dealing with the surface as Whistler, with the mere difference that Whistler asks us to regard him decoratively and Chase desires to be looked at technically, as one might consider a Stevens, a Vollon, a Fortuny, or a Boldini. We surely are not so narrow in outlook as to deny admiration and high rank to such masters of the brush as these. They are artists in the narrow sense that they deal with art alone and consider painting only from the æsthetic point of view, but who shall say they are not precisely and exactly right? Each turn of the screw, each new generation in art, pins us down more narrowly and positively to the material. Perhaps Whistler and Chase were wrong only in being ahead of their time.

At any rate, the belief in material and method as art *per se*, however it may jar preconceived notions, will have to be reckoned with. And here in America its most considerable advocate will have to be taken seriously. By certain standards we may judge his art as merely clever, but he conceived it and wrought it in all seriousness. Does a sword-hilt by Sansovino, or a salt dish by Cellini, or a screen by Utamaro lack in either seriousness or art? Why not then a canvas, in the same spirit of the skilled workman, by Whistler or Chase? Why not?





IX

JOHN W. ALEXANDER





## IX

### JOHN W. ALEXANDER

CHASE and Alexander were of the same faith in art though they varied in ritual. They both believed in the finality of good workmanship decoratively displayed. They had differing views of what constituted design and color, their atmosphere and light were not the same, and each had his peculiar handling; but with all this latitude for variation in method there was no essential difference in æsthetic aim or purpose. The portrait of a lady was to both of them not primarily a revelation of the lady but a presentation of a decorative pattern in which the sitter and her garmenting held large place because conforming happily to an "arrangement." This, of course, was the Whistlerian point of view with which Chase and Alexander were in sympathy. All three of them frequently rose above their creed and told tales of the lady's charm, or womanly instincts, or perhaps gave suggestion that she was a lady and not merely a studio model dressed for the part; but usually they were content with arranging her in a pattern as an entomologist might spread and pin to advantage a golden butterfly on a blue-green ground.

To question their practice is to take sides in a

very old quarrel in art. For they were the David and Ingres of the new dispensation. Their works were based in method, though the method was brush-work rather than drawing, and they were pronounced in arrangement though the arrangement was a pattern of light and color instead of line and group composition. Set over against them are the Delacroixs and Millets of to-day who are no longer romantic and dramatic, but lay stress on sentiment, feeling, significance, character, strength rather than mere pattern. It is not necessary to name them, for every one will recognize the species and call to mind the types. There are always two sides to a quarrel, and there are several sides to art. It may be a symphony of color as Whistler insisted, an arrangement of line or a matter of facile workmanship as Alexander and Chase contended. No one will deny that. In fact there is a modern disposition to locate the art of a picture strictly within the limits of craftsmanship. But a picture may express something more than the skill of the painter. Many of the craft have shown that it is a means of expressing moods, passions, feelings, sentiments, emotions; they insist that line and color, and all the what-not of technique, are merely the means to an end and not the end itself. Both arguments have merit and are abundantly exemplified in practice. And why not something worth while, something acceptable, in both?

There was good reason why Chase and Alexander should be accepted, because they came at a time when method in America was in sad need of reconstruction. Modern craftsmanship was practically unknown. They brought it into vogue, established it as the grammar of art, gave it the prominence it deserved. It was then, as now, the *sine qua non* of art. One must know how before he can say very much of moment. There have been painters and poets with very limited skill who have said things the world is glad to remember, but they are the exceptions rather than the rule. The Shakespeares, Goethes, Titians, and Rembrandts were all highly trained craftsmen. They had great things to say, surely; but should we have heard them had they belonged to the unskilled? How many in all the arts have had

“The vision and the faculty divine  
Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse!”

We need not, then, think lightly of the craftsman in American art. He has proved a much-needed person in the school. And his work has also turned out to be a very agreeable factor in the home. Art of a decided quality does lie in the eye and the hand. It can be greatly enhanced in significance by the addition of a mind and a soul, but these latter must be approached through the former to attain their full expres-



sion. For, to repeat, technique or craftsmanship is at the bottom of all artistic expression.

Alexander learned to paint in practically the same roundabout way as Chase. He was born in Alleghany City in 1856, and as a child was reared by his grandparents, his father and mother having died early. At twelve he was a telegraph messenger, and shortly afterward, with the death of his grandparents, he came under the guardianship of Colonel Edward J. Allen. He was persuaded to give up the telegraph work and go to school, but at eighteen he broke away and went to New York. He had given signs as a boy of artistic tendencies, his drawings had attracted some attention, and he went to New York to make illustrations for the Harpers. There was some disappointment at first. The Harpers had not heard of him and did not want his artistic services, not even as an apprentice. But they needed an office boy. He accepted the place, and through it got into the art department, where he finally came to work upon blocks and plates. Charles Parsons was then in charge of the department, and E. A. Abbey, Stanley Reinhart, and A. B. Frost were there. Alexander learned much from their counsel and example. From 1875 to 1877 there appeared in *Harper's Weekly* an occasional political cartoon signed "Alexander," and in 1877 during the great strike in Pittsburgh there were a number of large sketches and illustrations signed "J. W. Alex-

ander." Later on he did for the Harper publications and also for the *Century Magazine* various illustrations signed "J. W. A."; but this was after he had been to Munich and had had some exact training.

He remained with the Harpers three years, and then with Albert G. Reinhart he went to Europe. The pair had intended to study art in Paris at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, but on arrival there they found the school closed for the summer. With no French to their name, Paris was a little dreary, and they drifted on to Munich—because Reinhart understood a little German, it is said. The Munich Academy was open, and Alexander entered the classes of Professor Benz-cur and remained there for some three months. The teaching proved too academic and the living in Munich too high for him, and he went to Polling, a small town in Bavaria, where there was an American art colony under the shepherding of Frank Duveneck. Shirlaw, Currier, Joseph De Camp, Ross Turner were of the group. Alexander fell into good company and began at once to profit by the association. While at Polling he sent sketches to the student's exhibition at Munich and won for them a bronze medal—his first honor. Two years were passed in Bavaria and then he joined Duveneck's class to study art in Italy. There were twenty-three in the class, and Alexander with Duveneck went ahead to Florence to engage studios for them.

Two winters were spent at Florence—the summer months being more agreeably put in at Venice. It was at Venice in the summer of 1880 that Alexander met Whistler and received counsel and direction from him. The advice was very potent in helping him out of the dark Munich rut and suggesting that the decorative was perhaps more important than the merely realistic or representative. Indeed the Whistler influence was the most compelling the young student had yet encountered. It made a decided impression upon him and changed perhaps the whole trend of his art. For while Alexander never imitated Whistler's schemes or patterns, he accepted the decorative point of view, giving it out in his own way with many changes and modifications brought about by later observation in Paris. He was always impressionable and quick to adopt new ideas, and yet it is almost impossible in his work to trace home any feature to a given source. In that respect he was perhaps more original than Chase or even Whistler himself.

While in Florence he supported himself by sending drawings to the Harper publications and teaching a class of students; but he soon realized that he was holding back his own progress by such work, and in 1881 he decided to return to America. Arrived at Pittsburgh, he made a trip down the Ohio and the Mississippi with Fred Muller to illustrate an article on "King



Coal's Highway." The article appeared in *Harper's Monthly* for January, 1882. The illustrations were realistic enough, but not remarkable in any way. They created no furor. Alexander came on shortly thereafter to New York, took a studio in the German Bank Building, at Fourth Avenue and Fourteenth Street, and soon was doing a portrait of a little daughter of Henry Harper. He moved to the Chelsea Studios in Twenty-third Street, continued with portraiture, and became interested in the art movements of the time. People looked upon him as a young man of ability. He had not Chase's vogue but he, nevertheless, had his group of admirers.

In 1881 he was in Spain and Morocco, and in 1886 he went to England for the *Century Magazine*, having been commissioned to do certain portraits of literary men—George Bancroft, Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson. He did Stevenson at Bournemouth, stopping with him while sketching him. He also did Austin Dobson, and went to Ireland to draw some illustrations for articles by Charles de Kay. The portraits were apparently sketches in charcoal and gave only a summary of the heads. They were well done and rightly emphasized for reproduction. The illustrations for the Ireland articles were decidedly good in the landscapes—something for which Alexander had a talent, but which he never cared to follow up until late in life and then apparently for his own

pleasure. This work and, in fact, that of the next half-dozen years did not bring Alexander into any great prominence in America. He had not found himself—he had not “arrived” in a large sense.

Up to 1890 his work had hardly so much as suggested his later bent or method. The “Head of a Boy” and “Sketch of a Boy,” shown in a recent memorial exhibition at the Century Club, are both of them early efforts done at Polling. They are in the dark Munich style of Duveneck and not unlike things that Shirlaw and Chase were doing a few years earlier. “Old Cole” in the same exhibition, done in 1881, again indicates Munich teaching. The lights are surrounded by darks and the darks are darkened by bitumen. There is no attempt at fine color or decorative pattern, but rather a desire for the realistic largeness of the model with a resultant brusque modelling and some dragging of a heavily loaded brush. The portrait of “Thurlow Weed” gives a big strong head relieved by being in high light and again surrounded by darks. One might think from a casual glance that it had been inspired by Lenbach. The portrait of “Jefferson as Bob Acres,” while it still shows Munich methods, is something of a departure. It is a costume and footlight portrait with the lights very high, the shadows pronounced, the color very gay. It was well set, well drawn, easily painted upon ordinary can-

vas, and in the usual oil medium. The portrait had spirit and life about it and yet gave small indication of what Alexander's style would ultimately become. Just so with the rather fine portrait of "Walt Whitman," now in the Metropolitan Museum. The hark back to Lenbach in the insistent relief of the head and hands as spots of white surrounded by dark is quite apparent. Perhaps here there is a pose of the figure and a sweep of the beard that suggest Alexander's later swing and swirl of lines, but it is not very marked.

This work, done for the most part before he was thirty, was talked about and praised in New York art circles, but it was really Paris that gave Alexander rank. He had been married in 1887 to Miss Elizabeth Alexander, and in 1890 they went abroad for a few months that he might recuperate from an attack of the grippe. They remained away eleven years. The time was spent chiefly in Paris, and it was to the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts that he sent, in 1893, three portraits that made a decided hit. They were entitled "Portrait Gris," "Portrait Noir," and "Portrait Jaune." The titles suggest color schemes, qualities of tone, garments arranged gracefully to fill space and make a decorative pattern—in short, the things that thereafter gave individuality to Alexander's art. Paris immediately took notice of them; the Société elected him an associate member, and the next year,



when he sent a panel of five portraits, he was elected a full member. His reputation and his commissions from that time increased rapidly. He was a success.

Alexander has been called "the most Parisian of the Americans," and yet just why one hardly knows. His refined taste, his sensitiveness, his animation are less French than American, and it must be his method that suggests Paris. But whom in Paris? What painter can you point to as the original or even the inspiration of his style? Carrière, Besnard, La Touche—you think of them only to dismiss them from mind. Whistler, Albert Moore, Burne-Jones, the Japanese, afford little clew. Perhaps the obvious explanation is that Alexander merely followed his own inclination and developed a method and a style quite his own. Others have done so before him and why not he? Very likely some one suggested a coarse absorbent canvas with thin petroleum or turpentine as a medium, or he may have seen the results obtained by such materials in pictures at the Salon or elsewhere. Paris has always been replete with new mediums and methods and has had its generations of painters who could do no more with the new than with the old. But Alexander's painting was something more than an absorbent canvas. He had an original point of view and the new materials merely helped him to reveal it.

Perhaps his originality grew out of many ob-

servations and developed from many sources. Duveneck in the realistic and Whistler with the decorative each had their day and sway with him. Something of the Japanese becomes apparent in a flattening of the canvas, in elimination of non-essential features, in gaining a sketchy effect by filling in large spaces with flat tones and throwing emphasis upon salient points of high light and color. Finally comes an unusual employment of dress in making a pattern of swirling lines which not only contrast with the angles of the canvas but lend movement and life to the figure. The use of drapery for line effect is, of course, apparent all through art. Alexander may have taken suggestions regarding this from Greek marbles or Italian pictures or Pre-Raphaelite glass. But so vague and shadowy are all these sources of influence that one cannot trace them home. Such pictures as "The Green Gown," "A Rose," "The Gossip," "The Ring," have no counterpart in any painting, ancient or modern. One comes back again to a former conclusion that they are Alexander's own creations—his distinct contribution to art.

How far does the contribution carry? Well, little farther than the decorative face of the canvas. The handsome, well-gowned, and well-bred young woman who holds the rose or ring or bowl is only part of a color pattern on the canvas. She does not symbolize or signify much of anything beyond that. You could not guess if

she has a brain or a heart or a soul. She is not a document or a problem or even a character. Alexander did not believe that painting was a means of epitomizing abstract ideas but merely a way of revealing graceful color patterns that please the eye and hang harmoniously upon the wall. There is nothing intensive or dramatic or even narrative about his work. It is not sentimental or emotional or passion-strung. A late canvas like that entitled "Husband, Wife, and Child" may suggest sentiment, but only as a superfluity. The painter meant to stop with the completed pattern.

Almost always the pattern is agreeable and sufficient in itself as art. The space is happily filled with one figure, sometimes two, but seldom more. The linear design meets the upright of the frame with flowing lines in which repetition plays more of a part than contrast. "The Blue Bowl" is a good illustration. The figure is placed diagonally upon the canvas, the bowl lines are repeated in the head and shoulders, the dress is spread in fan-like lines toward the far corner of the canvas. The whole design is unusual and extraordinary but very graceful. So, too, with "The Ring," in the Metropolitan Museum, where a young woman seated on a lounge with a large straw hat in her lap is holding up a ring for admiration. The round hat somehow suggests a repetition of the round head, and the dress lines repeat its curves. Great care is taken with





"The Ring," by John W. Alexander.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



the linear arrangements of all these single figures. The composition is carefully thought out, wrought out, brought out.

Just as important as the design is the color scheme. It is, in fact, so prominent that the title of the picture is often derived from it. "The Green Gown" or "The Blue Bowl" are hints that green or blue is the key in which the picture is pitched. The continuance or repetition or perhaps slight variance of the green or blue runs through the whole picture and produces what is called a tone or harmony or symphony in green or blue. The aim with Alexander is precisely as with Whistler. Neither of them harps on the one note to the exclusion of every other, but the one note nevertheless prevails throughout. The picture by Alexander called "The Rose" shows a young girl in dull green which would be monotonous if insisted upon everywhere. It is relieved by the pink of the flesh, the dark hair, the white linen, but above all by the rose which the girl holds in her hand. The rose hue is in the same tone of light as the green and emphasizes the latter because red is the complementary color of green.

The appearance of complementary or slightly varying colors in the central high lights argues the prevalence of a large half-tone in the background and intermediate spaces. This half-tone when prepared in a thin medium like petroleum and used upon a soft or absorbent canvas sinks



into the canvas, becomes an atmospheric depth, becomes vague, indefinite, mysterious. To avoid too much monotony of half-tone Alexander very often introduced a burst of light upon the figure. This sounds like the old Rembrandt-Lenbach formula which he followed in his early student days at Munich, but his later practice diffused the illumination, made it less hard on the edges, and more atmospheric. Even in certain pictures where a ray of sunshine is shot into a dark room through an unlatched door the ray is not hard and the half-tone gives it an atmospheric setting quite extraordinary.

Under these peculiar conditions of canvas, of tone, of illumination, the drawing is often flattened, even abbreviated. The heads and costumes are brushed in broadly, the hands are sometimes passed over with a mere suggestion of form or value, the accessories are still more vague in line, in bulk, in texture. Nothing but things of vital importance are given. By suppression of the parts the painter gets concentration on certain salient features of surface, or light or color. With thin painting in the ground and shadows and fat painting in the high lights the picture takes on the look of a large and easily done sketch. A feeling of freedom, of spontaneity, is apparent, and with it life, spirit, gusto in the recital.

There was more or less variation of this sketch-appearance in all Alexander's late canvases.

Sometimes he drew with sharper edges and more protrusive modelling and produced a more realistic effect; but far oftener he gave merely a suggestion of form or created an atmospheric nimbus with his tone that surrounded and enveloped the figure. It has been frequently noted in these pages that almost every painter oscillates between too much drawing and not enough. When Alexander dismissed his form rather summarily for a tone or a texture, his critics declared him vague, shadowy, merely decorative; when he insisted upon the drawing and perhaps minimized his tone, he was declared prosaic. He did not have to be told that he was between the devil and the deep sea. Every painter knows it, or comes to know it, before he has struggled through many canvases.

A more frequent comment on Alexander was that he was a painter of attitudes and draperies—nature plus a pose. To avoid the conventional he chose the accidental and the momentary rather than the characteristic or permanent. He was seeking the decorative, and his girl in green or gray or yellow was just a little more elegantly disposed than in nature. It was frankly an “arrangement”—a placing of the figure and a disposition of the accessories to the best advantage. The robes were swung in gracefully with no sharp angle lines or crabbed pothooks to break the flow. The photographer of to-day seeks to produce the same graceful exaggeration

but with less success. And the realist who depicts the charwoman bending over the ash-barrel usually exaggerates more positively the other way. If the beauty of the ugly in an awkward pose may be accounted art, why not the beauty of the charming in a graceful pose? Alexander got what he could out of his handsome model, making her a little more graceful than reality, to be sure, but did not Van Dyck, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Lawrence, do the same thing with marked success?

His portrait sitters differed from his abstract types holding a ring or a blue bowl or a rose chiefly in the matter of a facial likeness. The "arrangement" was carried out with the one as with the other, though it was usually not so conspicuous in the portrait as in the type. Perhaps because the costume and coloring of women were more adaptable to the "arrangement" than the costume and coloring of men, the painter achieved the reputation of being more successful with the former as sitters than with the latter. Certainly in his most attractive portraits of women he has not failed to use graceful composition, and has gotten much pictorial effect out of his color, tone, and light. The "Mrs. Hastings," for instance, is both portrait and picture. It is expectant in look and lively in spirit. The pose in profile, which is repeated vaguely in the Winged Victory back of the figure, is complemented by a color and a tone quite



in keeping. It is one of the painter's best efforts. The "Mrs. Duryea" is perhaps a little more conscious in its formality. The space is not so well filled and the dress spreads too obviously. With the "Mrs. Ledyard Blair" the dress again spreads for decorative effect and becomes pronounced in importance. A similar result is apparent in the portrait known as the "Woman in Gray" now in the Luxembourg. All of these last-mentioned portraits have excellences quite aside from their decorative planning, and the "Woman in Gray" had much to do in creating Alexander's vogue in Paris; but one turns from them to the refined simplicity of the "Miss Dorothy Roosevelt" with some relief. Sometimes nature is not the better for being "arranged."

When it was necessary to insist upon characterization Alexander could do it, and do it well. The "Mrs. Wheaton," an old lady with gray hair and lace cap, done in 1904, is excellent in its gentle (not brutal) realization of the model. It is quite in the class with the Whistler and Chase mother portraits, and in refinement is perhaps superior to either of the others. The children canvases of "Eleanor Alexander" with the doll in the chair or "Geraldine Russell" standing at full length are equally good.

It is true enough that the grace and charm belonging to women and children seemed to appeal to Alexander more than the sturdier qualities of men. He painted many men but

they were not always as forceful as the "Fritz Thaulow." That figure has bulk and body to it but again no brutality. It is more forceful than the "Walt Whitman," which is just a little too much ironed out and smoothed down for the vociferous original. The beard and hair and *soi-disant* look are those of a poet rather than Whitman—a distinction with a difference to some people. The "Dr. Patton" in academic robes as president of Princeton is probably as satisfactory as any of Alexander's portraits of men. It is a simple, well-drawn, convincing presentation, not surprising in any way nor again falling short in any way.

All of this work is simple, large in design, not confused with detail or small objects, and always with ample breathing room. Alexander attempted no elaborate grouping or historical composition except in his designs for mural decoration. The earlier pictures such as "Pandora" and "The Pot of Basil" are merely single figures. "The Piano" is a single figure with a piano, the "Memories" is two figures, as is also the "Music Panel." They are all spacious and do not crowd the canvas or the frame. Occasionally he did landscapes—some of them up in the hills about Cornish, New Hampshire—in which there is the same simplicity of design and feeling of space in hillside, valley, and sky. His landscapes have a decorative swing of line similar in kind to his figure pictures, and there is some-



“Walt Whitman,” by John W. Alexander.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





thing of the same tonal effect, though less pronounced. In other words, the painter saw or read the decorative into landscape as into figures, which may be considered a mistake if one is looking for a realistic presentation, but is just as certainly a success if one is looking for something to hang upon the wall that shall not clash with every other object in the room.

Therein lies a marked feature of Alexander's work. It is art that can be lived with. It takes its place in the household and accommodates itself to almost any color scheme because of its neutral tone and lack of glittering notes. How many modern easel pictures are keyed up to the shrieking point, and are planned to outshriek their neighbors in an exhibition! They are Salon pictures—"machines" that make a clatter and having served their purpose go back to the studio and are faced against the wainscoting. But Alexander's pictures could be taken home without danger of a family quarrel. They are delicate enough in pattern to go in the drawing-room and refined enough in manner to be seen and not heard.

Perhaps this very quality of refinement, so acceptable in his easel pictures, was something of a defect in his mural decorations. The greatly enlarged wall space of a public building called for more intensity of color, more sharp contrast of angle lines, more loftiness and elaborateness of composition than the painter

dreamt of in his art philosophy. His attempts at mural painting were somewhat sporadic. It was not exactly his *métier*, and though he took it up with energy when asked to do so, he succeeded in producing little more than an enlargement of his easel pictures. The same tone, light, and color of his portraits and single figures went into the groupings in the Congressional Library, the Harrisburg Capitol, and the Carnegie Institute at Pittsburgh. The Library decorations gave the "Evolution of the Book" in six lunettes that illustrated the stages of book-making rather than symbolized or epitomized them. At Harrisburg the theme was the "Evolution of the State," another set of fourteen lunettes. The decoration at Pittsburgh was the most ambitious performance of the three and sought to tell the story of Pittsburgh—the story of steel and labor. It is called the "Apotheosis of Pittsburgh," with the city personified by a knight in armor with a flaming sword in his hand instead of the large female figure of conventional decoration. The panels carry over three stories of the entrance-hall of the Carnegie Institute and some five hundred figures are used. The first floor shows the half-naked furnacemen at work amid smoke, steam, and fire glare. The smoke and steam rise up and envelop, make an atmospheric setting for, the allegorical figures of the second floor that from all sides are bringing tributes to the mailed figure of Pittsburgh. The allegorical



figures are winged, robed in long trailing garments, and drift lightly through the air or upon clouds. The third floor contains lunettes typifying the arts and sciences.

The whole decoration is well thought out, and is put together, within its framings of yellowish marble, with a distinctly decorative effect. The tone of it is quiet, subdued, restful—perhaps too much so. The figures are graceful, even the men—again, perhaps too much so. One is not sorry that Labor is shown with cheerful face and normal body rather than sad-browed, nerve-racked, and body-wrecked, after the Zola-Meunier formula. That exaggeration has become just as conventional and wearisome as the prettiness of Bouguereau, or the pettiness of Meissonier. But Alexander's workers are perhaps too elegant for reality as his floating figures are too graceful for allegory. There is a feeling that there is not enough mental grip about them. It is paradoxical to say that the decoration is too decorative, but that states the case quite rightly. The pattern and the color that set off an easel picture appropriately fail to carry when employed on so vast a scale of wall decoration—fail to carry from sheer attenuation of motive and design. The Pittsburgh decoration has not enough strength behind it to spread over five thousand feet of painted surface. Strength was never a quality of Alexander's art. He had skill, grace, refinement, charm,

style, but he never attempted to win by force or power.

After his return from Paris in 1901 he took up his permanent residence in New York and immediately entered into the art life of the city and the country. He had received gold medals at Paris and St. Louis and the Legion of Honor from France, had placed his pictures in public galleries all the way from St. Petersburg and Odessa to Chicago, and had become a member of some twenty art societies. In addition to the McDowell Club and the School Art League he was the head of the Federation of Fine Arts, the Society of Mural Painters, and from 1909 the president of the National Academy of Design. His interest in art movements was great and the energy he gave to them was at the expense not only of his painting but his health. As president of the Academy of Design his devotion was unflagging even though it met with almost everything but encouragement and success. During his presidency he took up anew the problem of a building site which had been dragging along for years. There had been failure in Fifty-seventh Street in 1896, and over the Lenox Library plot in 1904, but Alexander failed four further times with the sites of the Arsenal, the Central Park, Bryant Park, and the Railroad Yard.

This with many other burdens he was carrying helped to wear him out. He had never been ro-

bust. On the contrary, he was of delicate, refined physique and possessed of a mental energy that far outran his bodily strength. Moreover, he never knew how to spare himself. In his last years with many overhead burdens to carry he could still take on new enterprises. At Onteora, where he had a summer home, he became much interested in costuming and decorative settings for the theatre, and later, with Mrs. Alexander, made many designs for Miss Maude Adams's productions of "Jeanne d'Arc," "Peter Pan," "Chantecler," and "The Little Minister." In New York he presided over the National Institute of Arts and Letters, spoke at every gathering of art people, and was at the beck and call of society whenever anything of an artistic nature was desired. At the last—that is, in 1915—death came to him quite suddenly.

Both socially and artistically Alexander had become a man of distinction. Every one liked his refined, gentlemanly personality, admired his art, and listened to his counsel. For these reasons and because of his commanding position he came to have a strong influence in all art matters. He had set a pattern that many of the younger painters followed, and, like Chase, had helped to establish the latter-day tradition of craftsmanship here in America. It was not the exact craftsmanship of Chase or Alexander or Sargent that was established, though each of them has had his imitators. The movement for



sound technical education in American art was of no one painter's devising. The three were typical of the movement, but there were others—Weir, Twachtman, Beckwith, Blum, Brush, Thayer, Dewing, Cox, Blashfield—who were of the same faith and who added their quota of strength. All of them working together, with a common energy and enthusiasm, have created a body of belief as to what constitutes style and skill in art. They have established a tradition based in sound craftsmanship than which nothing could be safer or better for the future of American art. It was Alexander's part to help lay the foundation-stones. War or national madness or economic change may prevent any splendid palace of art arising therefrom, but at least Alexander and his contemporaries builded the firm foundation—builded perhaps better than they knew.

**X**

**JOHN S. SARGENT**





## X

### JOHN S. SARGENT

THE major events in Mr. Sargent's life as we read them or hear them told to-day seem in no way striking or startling. He has moved along well-trodden paths, in a well-ordered career, responsive always to the teaching of his youth, and reflective of his social and intellectual surroundings. He did not wholly achieve art, for some of it was born to him and some of it, perhaps, was thrust upon him. He came to it early, grew up in its atmosphere, and was under its spell at an impressionable age. Which is to say that he is not a self-made painter in the Inness-Wyant sense, but something of a traditional painter in the La Farge sense. Training started him aright, but his great success is, of course, not wholly due to that. Genius alone can account for the remarkable content of his work.

He was born in Florence in 1856. His parents were Americans residing in Italy at the time of his birth. The father was from Gloucester, Massachusetts, and had studied medicine in Philadelphia, afterward remaining in the latter city to practise his profession. He had met and married a Miss Singer of an old Philadelphia family, and later they had gone to Florence to

live. Legally, therefore, the painter is an American, but the legal tie is about all that binds him to us. We like to claim him because he is a celebrity, but in reality he is an American only in a nominal way. He was not reared or educated here, he has not lived here, he has not fought in our quarrels or failed in our failures or succeeded in our successes. The greater part of his life has been passed abroad amid other scenes and other peoples. As a boy he travelled about Europe with his parents, speaking German as his first acquired language, if I report him aright, and gaining the bulk of his schooling in Italy and Germany. At eighteen he went to Paris and entered the *atelier* of Carolus Duran—at that time perhaps the most famous of the French portrait-painters. It was not until 1876, when Sargent was twenty years old, that he saw the shores of the United States. That was his first visit. He did not stay for any length of time, and what were his impressions of the land and the people we do not know. Several times since then he has been here for short periods, but one or another of the large European capitals has been his residence. Since 1884 his permanent abiding-place has been London, though he lived for a time in Paris, and just now (1918) he is again here in America.

It would seem then that however much pride we may take in Sargent's achievements we can hardly be proud because he is peculiarly our

own. He is not American in the sense of knowing the land and the people and reflecting our life and civilization. Just as little has his birth in Italy made him Italian or his residence in France and England made him French or English. No country can claim him, no people can appropriate him, for in reality he is a citizen of the world at large—the manner of man we sometimes call a cosmopolite. If there is one place above another that he can be traced to and said to emanate from it is Paris; and Paris is no longer merely the first city of France. It, too, has become cosmopolitan—the centre of modern life and the gathering-place of the world's knowledge, intelligence, and fashion. Sargent reflects its taste and its skill, but not anything else that is peculiarly French, not anything that smacks of the French soil. The accomplishments of Paris are his, but without the sentiment or the feeling that is French.

It is questionable if a man who is equally at home in London, Paris, Florence, and New York will or can have a very strong sentiment about any one of those places. He can hardly spend a winter in the United States and become vitally interested in democracy, and the next winter go to England and fall deeply in love with aristocracy. Nor can he live for a few months in Spain or Germany and penetrate to the quick the life and character of its people. The cosmopolite who moves hither and yon about the



globe hardly ever takes to heart the affairs and interests of those with whom he is temporarily sojourning. On the contrary, it is rather his attitude of mind that nothing is to be taken too seriously. To ruffle one's composure with an emotion or to worry one's self about a sentiment is the very thing he seeks to avoid. He accepts the facts as facts, concerns himself with the appearance of things, is a stickler for the refinements, and a great student of manners, methods, and styles. He quickly absorbs whatsoever is artistic or intelligent or learned, his perceptions are very acute, his knowledge and manner are polished to the last degree; but the strong feeling that, after all, lies at the bottom of great endeavor finds no utterance in his work, and the national beliefs that are really the insistent and persistent things in both literature and art are not the mainspring of his action.

So much may be said in a general way about the painter we are considering; and so much without a thought of either praise or blame. Mr. Sargent's life has been the result of peculiar circumstances—fortunate circumstances some may think, or perhaps unfortunate, as others may hold. At least they have been instrumental in bringing forth an accomplished painter whose art no one can fail to admire. That his work may be admired understandingly it is quite necessary to comprehend the personality of the artist—to understand his education, his associa-

tions, his artistic and social environments. For if the man himself is cosmopolitan his art is not less so. It is the perfection of world-style, the finality of method. It is learned to an extraordinary degree, accurate, scientific, almost faultless; but it belongs to no country, reflects no people, discloses no sentiment, and causes no emotion. It is calmly intellectual and begets enthusiasm only for its absolute truthfulness to appearance and the brilliant facility of its achievement.

To behold and to accomplish—that is to see and to paint—seem to have been Sargent's ambition from the start. What gave his original impetus toward art is not disclosed, but his mother was a clever person with water-colors, and she may have prompted his interest in painting. At any rate, he early became proficient in drawing. As a boy, sketching in the Tyrol, Leighton saw his work and remarked its skill. Later on he was entered as a pupil in the schools of the Florence Academy. Travelling at vacation times with his parents he saw many pictures and doubtless studied the old masters from many angles. Everywhere among the Renaissance painters he must have remarked the skilled craftsman, and perhaps his early aspirations were to excel as they had excelled. Certainly it was with no little knowledge of drawing that he presented himself at the Paris *atelier* of Carolus Duran in 1874, aged eighteen.

Carroll Beckwith, one of the earliest and best-loved of the pupils in the *atelier* and a life-long friend of Sargent, has often told me the story of Sargent's arrival. He came with his father, and when Beckwith opened the door he found a refined-looking gentleman and a tall, thin son standing there. Beckwith, as the *massier* of the class, presented the pair to the master. The portfolio of sketches, which Sargent had under his arm, was presently examined, with the class forming an admiring half-circle at the back. It is reported that Carolus observed that the *nouveau* had much to unlearn, but Beckwith says the class was astonished at the pencil-drawings and the facility of the water-colors. The *nouveau* was accepted by the master and was a marked success from the start.

Carolus was a good teacher after his kind and impressed his method upon Sargent, who accepted and bettered it. The method in brief did not start with the carefully prepared sketch of Ingres or even a charcoal-drawing upon the canvas, but a full brush of color laid on in mass. Pupils were to draw, model, paint at one and the same time. In blocking in a figure the paint might be thick and the edges at first sharp, but the values, the tone, the properly constructed body were to be absolute. Underlying structure was a necessity. Sargent learned that early in his career and never forgot it. His brush-work has been thought his greatest technical feature,



but that of itself would be for nothing holden did it not by its certainty produce absolute drawing. He has always been a consummate draftsman.

Yet it was Carolus who taught facility and ease with the brush and preached Velasquez to his pupils. No doubt the master saw great qualities in the Spaniard where his pupils saw only great dexterity, but at any rate their attention was called to the fact that a picture may be made interesting in its surface and be the better therefor. Sargent was a quick convert to this idea, and he very soon developed a breadth and truth of brush-work that astonished his master and set Paris talking. All his life it has been one of the pronounced features of his technique, and yet not a feature by which his art stands or falls. One of his latest portraits—that of Henry James—does not noticeably show it. The surface is almost smooth so inconspicuous is the brushing, and yet there are few who will not count the James as one of the best considered, cleanest cut, and most profound of Sargent's portraits.

He remained under Carolus for several years, assisted the master in some of his decorations, and soon began to produce noteworthy work of his own. One of his earliest portraits was that of Carolus himself, which at once became talked about, not only as a likeness of the famous master but as the work of a remarkable pupil.

In 1878 he painted *En route pour la pêche*, a figure composition which attracted much attention in the Salon. The next year he went to Spain, and from that journey came "El Jaleo," now in the Boston Museum, and a number of other Spanish pictures. These theme pictures, much as they were praised, did not, could not, determine the painter's bent. Like other young men, he probably had determined nothing, and eventually let circumstances settle the matter of subject. He did not have to wait long. In 1881 he put out a full-length portrait called a "Lady with Rose" that had so much vitality about it, as well as charm, that it far outran all his earlier performances. The success of it, followed by the "Hall of the Four Children," in which four of the Beit children were shown, and then the portrait of "Madame G——," seemed automatically to place him among the portraitists.

The last-named picture, a full-length in profile, now in the Metropolitan Museum, set all Paris by the ears. The wonderful if somewhat sharp drawing of the face and head, the equally fine portraiture of the hands, arms, figure, and dress, commanded instant attention. The subject was a great beauty, and the painter, painting precisely what he saw, had dealt with her remorselessly. Even then they began to discuss Sargent as a character reader, an anatomist, a psychologist, a physiognomist—great nonsense to be sure, but nevertheless suggestive of his remarkable

truth of observation. It was perhaps this very quality that soon brought him more commissions for portraits than he could fill and possibly led to the virtual abandonment for the time being of other themes.

In taking up portraiture as the field of his endeavor Sargent was perhaps wise as well as fortunate, for it requires the keen, cool observer, the man who can record the fact without romance, to make a good portrait-painter; and Sargent has proved himself an observer above all. He is not a poet in paint, nor does he indulge in sentiment, feeling, or emotion. He records the fact. If I apprehend him rightly, such theory of art as he possesses is founded in observation. One night in Gibraltar some fifteen years ago I was dining with him at the old Cecil Hotel. We had been on ship for a dozen days and were glad to get ashore. That night, as a very unusual thing, Sargent talked about painting—talked of his own volition. He suggested his theory of art in a single sentence: “You see things that way” (pointing slightly to the left) “and I see them this way” (pointing slightly to the right). He seemed to think that would account for the variation or peculiarity of eye and mind, and, with a manner of doing—a personal method—there was little more to art. Such a theory would place him in measured agreement with Henry James, whose definition of art has been quoted many times: “Art is a



point of view and genius a way of looking at things." But whether Sargent has followed James, or James followed Sargent, in that definition, I am not able to record.

James, however, did not stop on that precise line. In 1887 in writing about Sargent he said: "The highest result is attained when to the element of quick perception a certain faculty of lingering reflection is added," and he continued, "I mean the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problems." James certainly meant by that sympathy, deep human interest, if not sentiment, feeling, and emotion; but Sargent never showed these qualities in his work and has more than once repudiated them by word of mouth. It is a popular contention that he does see "new things that were not on the surface," that he is a character reader; and that he is a bitter satirist in paint. Again the painter has denied these alleged accomplishments, and with some warmth into the bargain.

Frank Millet told me years ago that Sargent, painting at Broadway, England, needed a white marble column in a picture he was then working upon. There was none at hand, but, at Millet's suggestion, he got a carpenter to make a wooden

column and had it painted a clean white. This was set up and Sargent tried to paint it in the picture as a marble column, but with the unexpected result that on the canvas it looked not like marble but like a wooden column painted white. He could not get below "the surface," though he tried to do so. And Kenyon Cox in a strikingly just estimate of Sargent\* tells this story: "He had painted a portrait in which he was thought to have brought out the inner nature of his sitter, and to have 'seen through the veil' of the external man. When asked about it he is said to have expressed some amazement at the idea, and to have remarked: 'If there were a veil I should paint the veil; I can paint only what I see.'" And Cox adds: "Whether he said it or not, I am inclined to think that this sentence expresses the truth." It does; and also Sargent's self-imposed limitation. He does not want to see below the surface; he thinks the surface in itself, if rightly handled, is sufficient. But there is an explanation that may reconcile these different contentions.

A painter who has been looking at human heads for many years sees more than the man who casually looks up to recognize an acquaintance on the street. I do not mean that he sees more "character"—that is more scholarship or conceit or pride of purse or firmness of will or shrewdness of thought; but merely that he sees

\* *Old Masters and New*, by Kenyon Cox, New York, 1905.

the physical conformation more completely than we do. Well, every one sooner or later moulds his own face. It becomes marked or set or shaped in response to continued methods of thinking and acting. When that face comes under the portrait-painter's eye he does not see the scholar, the banker, the senator, the captain of industry; but he does see, perhaps, certain depressions of the cheek or lines about the eyes or mouth or contractions of the lips or protrusions of the brow or jaw that appeal to him strongly because they are cast in shadow or thrown up sharply in relief of light. These surface features he paints perhaps with more emphasis than they possess in the original because they appeal to him emphatically, and presently the peculiar look that indicates the character of the man appears. What the look may indicate, or what kind or phase of character may be read in or out of the look, the portrait-painter does not usually know or care. It is not his business to know. He paints what he sees and has as little discernment of a character as of a mind. He gives, perhaps without knowing their meaning, certain protrusions and recessions of the surface before him and lets the result tell what tale it may.

In the production of the portrait accurate observation is more than half the battle. If a painter sees and knows his subject thoroughly, he will have little trouble in telling what he





"Mrs. Pulitzer," by John S. Sargent.



sees and knows; and to say of Sargent that he observes rightly and records truly is to state the case in a sentence. Nothing in the physical presence escapes him. The slight inclination of a head, the shyness of a glance, the mobility of a mouth, the uneasiness of a hand, the nervous strain of a gesture are all turned to account in the ultimate result. Every tone of color in itself and in its relation to the other tones, every light in its relation to its shadow and to the other lights, every melting contour in contrast with every accented contour, and every texture in relation to every other texture—all are caught within the angle of the painter's focus.

His portraits are the complete demonstration of his observation. They may not be all that could be wished for in soul, but they are not lacking in physical life—in that which can be seen. You will not be able to look into the eyes and seem to know the inner consciousness of the sitter, as in a portrait by Rembrandt (the "soul" is Rembrandt's, not the sitter's); but you will feel the bodily presence, the physical fact, as you do in a portrait by Frans Hals. There is the Marquand portrait at the Metropolitan Museum to which reference may be made. How well he has emphasized the facts of the spare figure, the refined if somewhat weary face! How very effective the placing of the figure in the chair, the turn of the head, and that thin hand against which the head rests. Every



physical feature is just as it should be. Look at the bone structure of the forehead, the setting of the eyes, the protrusion of the lower lip, the modelling of the mouth and chin. Could anything be more positive! The painter has given you only what he has seen, but can you not get out of these physical features—even from the thin, patrician hand—some indication of the man's character? The painter *does* give the character of the sitter but not in the way the populace supposes. The effort is not conscious. The character is merely the result of accurately seeing and drawing the surface appearance.

All Sargent's portraits of men are revelations of things seen and they are all based on the physical presence. The "Speaker Reed" and the "Mr. Chamberlain" are likenesses of men in the flesh, done apparently without a thought of their being statesmen. There is nothing of the official about them and you would not be able to say that they were political leaders. They did not look the politician in life and the painter would not go behind the facial report. Sometimes a knowledge of what the man really was may have proved bothersome to him. He told me in 1903 that he had done very little satisfactory work that year with portraits of officials at Washington. He liked his head of "General Leonard Wood" and was much interested in the type, but the standing portrait of "President

Roosevelt" he did not think any too successful. The "President Wilson" done in 1917 is of a piece with the Roosevelt portrait and probably both were handicapped by shortness of time—insufficient time for complete observation. But aside from being hurried, the thought that he was painting people high in office and much was expected of him, must have had a deterrent effect upon his brush. For he could no more paint the office than he could paint behind the "veil" or get at the "soul." John Hay, Edwin Booth, Richard M. Hunt were very distinguished characters, but Sargent had no recipe for painting distinction and had to paint what was before him. The result was that the Hay and the Hunt were in no way remarkable portraits, whereas the Booth was exceptionally fine. It was not the characters that Booth had played but his own gentle, refined nature that had left its mark upon his face. Sargent saw it readily enough and had no need to plough beneath the surface for it.

His method of procedure with women's portraits is not different from that of men. He seeks the personal presence, sees keenly every physical peculiarity, and gives as truthfully as is consistent with pigments the facts as he sees them. There is no romance of mood, no reflective musing, no idealizing or prettifying of the likeness. All phases of fashionable life have come to his studio and he has painted a host of social celeb-

rities, some of them more worthy of his brush than others. Many times he has painted the grand lady in flashing jewels and gorgeous robes and been accused of vulgarity in the doing of it. But the accusation will not hold. The vulgarity has been in the sitter and has been shown by the painter without feeling or perhaps quite unconsciously. Many times the lady, the robes, and the jewels have been given without a suspicion of vulgarity because there was none in the model. That wondrous creation that appeared in the Salon so many years ago—the tall lady in the magenta gown—was something bordering on the bizarre; it was flashing, glittering, noisy, but not unrefined in any sense. The portrait of “Miss Terry as Lady Macbeth” is “stagey,” as perhaps it should be, for again the staginess was before the painter; but surely it is not wanting in taste. And for refinement, distinction, sensitiveness, what could be better than the beautiful portrait of “Lady Agnew”? Whatever may be the qualities or defects of the sitter, Sargent may be trusted to record the facts before him exactly as they are, and let the burden of their explanation fall on the friends or the family, if it must.

His successes in other fields of painting than portraiture are due to the same keenness of observation and are perhaps merely manifestations of the portrait instinct. The lovely “Carnation Lily Lily Rose” is little more than





"Carnation Lily, Lily Rose," by John S. Sargent.

In the National Gallery of British Art, London.



the portrait of two little girls lighting Chinese lanterns in a flower-garden. It is of course carefully arranged, and told with great beauty of color and light; but the painting of the lilies shows the same exactness of observation that characterizes the faces. They are portraits of lilies. "Carmencita" is again a portrait of a dancing-girl in costume, with powder on her face and rouge on her lips. She has paused a moment from dancing and is breathing quickly and Sargent chose that moment to paint her. His Venetian scenes, including the later water-colors, are again portraits of places just as his alligators lying in the mud, or his "St. Jerome" lying in the wood, or his marble quarries lying in the sun are striking likenesses of the objects themselves. They are all treated in the portrait spirit—that is, from the point of view of an observer and a recorder rather than a rhapsodist or a lover. Sargent does not rhapsodize, at least not in his works. The decoration in the Boston Public Library is possibly an exception. It evidently cost the painter much time and thought, but the symbolism of it bewilders and its excellence lies less in meaning or appropriateness than in masterful execution. It does not enthrall or sway or charm; it astonishes by the brilliancy of its coloring and the supreme excellence of its workmanship. It is something that one marvels over but cannot fall in love with. And the most satisfactory part of it is perhaps



the panel of the prophets, which is essentially portraiture again—that is, something painted from the model.

If I have not misstated the case it would seem as though Sargent's painting could be epitomized as nature plus an eye and a hand, external nature at that. He has never pretended or suggested that he delves beneath the surface, that he dreams or poetizes or evokes loveliness out of his inner consciousness and infuses it into his canvases. It is doubtful if he has even indulged to any great extent in that elevation of the technical problem by long reflection which Henry James refers to. From sheer truth of observation his children, as in the "Carnation Lily Lily Rose" or the "Beatrice," are childlike, and perhaps shy, his young women graceful and possibly nervous or affected, his men forceful, mentally alert, occasionally posing for posterity. He tells the truth and knows not how to do otherwise. How radically different in result are the portraits of Lady Ian Hamilton, Mrs. Pulitzer, Mrs. Marquand, of Colonel Bruce, Mr. Chase, and Mr. Rockefeller! Yet who that has known the originals will say that they are not true to the originals!

A limitation! Yes, but what artist has not limited his endeavors! It is by not trying to do everything that occasionally one succeeds in doing something. And if in painting one chooses to be a recorder of facts rather than a concocter



"Carmencita," by John S. Sargent.

In the Luxembourg, Paris.





of fiction, why should we grieve ! How very little Sargent can concoct anything, even composition, is apparent in his group-portraits of two or three people—the Misses Hunter, for an example. The pattern bothered him, he could not “arrange” the sitters satisfactorily, and, finally having crowded them into the canvas, he painted them as he saw them, with the result that they look crowded. The fresco at Boston is decorative, to be sure, by virtue of its coloring and gilding, but as a composition it will hardly pass muster. It is a curious gathering of jewel-like hues, but it can make small pretense to a satisfactory mural composition. Sargent has never demonstrated great ability in arrangement, and so far as the public knows has never tried for historical composition.

The portrait of the single figure is his greatest success. Placing it upon the canvas calls for no great imagination or change in the model; and the opportunity for good drawing—his strongest technical accomplishment perhaps—is present. How well he draws ! His light is in no way remarkable; it lacks subtlety, mystery, and all that cookery of the brush whereby light and shade are distorted and made to suggest the existence of things unseen; but his drawing is so profound that at times it is almost uncanny. It is impossible to separate it from the swift handling of the surface, for he gets the underlying structure and the overlying texture with one

and the same stroke. By a twist of the brush he may give drawing, texture, value, hue, all at once. In this respect—his wonderful facility with the brush—he is in the class with Rubens.

It is this latter feature of his work that excites the greatest admiration of his fellow artists. The final result of his handling is to give one the impression of work done easily, in fact, rather improvised than premeditated. But the impression is somewhat misleading. Every stroke is calmly calculated, every touch is coolly designed. If the effect looks labored, the palette-knife is used to clean the canvas and the work is done over again. Infinite pains are taken that infinite pains shall not appear. There is no excitement or feverish haste, however swift the brush may seem to travel. The nimble hand obeys a well-trained mind, and if the work is easily and accurately done, it is not through any burst of inspiration or preternatural facility of the moment, but through long and careful training.

Least of all is there any trickery about it. The painting is just plain painting with ordinary canvases, brushes, and pigments squeezed out of lead tubes. It is the simplest and most direct kind of brushing. Sargent has never been led astray by any of the technical phases or crazes. His method of handling is perhaps

Parisian though it harks back to Hals, Velasquez, Goya, Tiepolo, without exactly resembling any one of them. In its fluid quality perhaps it has more affinity with the work of Rubens, though again there is no positive resemblance. It is Sargent's own way of expressing himself.

That there are defects attending this quality of expressiveness will not be denied, but they are comparatively unimportant. In the simple spreading of wet liquid paint certain results of depth or hue or texture are likely to be sacrificed. Often a profound shadow depth is produced by repeated glazings; thumbing and kneading of pigments on the canvas frequently result in a quality of color that cannot be directly spread with a brush; and, again, there are peculiar effects produced by underbasing that are not obtainable by surface manipulation. Kenyon Cox thinks that Sargent perhaps loses somewhat in textures by his direct method and cites as illustration his flesh painting.

"The sweeps of opaque color laid on with a full brush are apt to give a texture as of drapery, no matter how accurate the particular tints may be; and if we are to have the pleasure of instantaneous execution, we must generally accept it with some diminution of the pleasure derivable from beautiful flesh painting. . . . Indeed, it may be said that the highest beauty of coloring is always more or less incompatible



with too great frankness of procedure and demands a certain reticence and mystery.”\*

There may be, probably is, considerable truth in that statement though I cannot for the moment get away from Rubens—one of the most direct painters in all art and yet a great colorist and a splendid painter of textures, especially the texture of flesh. Sargent is no such colorist as Rubens, but the lack is perhaps inherent in the man rather than in the method. At the same time Mr. Cox is right in degree. Perhaps the most engaging quality of flesh coloring, to return to the illustration, can be obtained only by additions and overlayings of paint which give the feeling of the coloring coming up from below to the surface. The direct method will not answer save in the hands of a Rubens.

But the end justifies the means with Sargent. Precision in drawing immediately begins to evaporate when one starts to knead or overlay the surface; and to weaken Sargent’s accuracy in drawing would be to imperil his authority and dispel such a thing as conviction. One cannot imagine it. If he should now deliberately try for subtlety or depth of color or seek to obtain a mysterious or illusory or enamelled surface, his friends in art would immediately declare him in decline and roll their eyes heavenward in despair. But fortunately

\* *Ibid.*

there is no immediate prospect of such a thing. The painter's inclination seems well settled, and neither his eye nor his hand has lost its cunning. On the contrary, since he practically abandoned portrait-painting more than a dozen years ago and turned his attention to landscape and effects of direct sunlight, he has been producing the most astonishing pictures of his career. The things that he sees and draws would have been thought as wild as cubist fancies thirty years ago. And yet they are the most positive pronouncements of elemental truths that he has yet put forth.

That does not mean that there is anything weird or queer about these later doings. They are merely appearances of form, color, and light presented with astonishing breadth, force, and simplicity. Sargent has never evidenced any liking for things queer. He is too intelligent for fads and fancies, too sane for mad movements in art. There is not the slightest indication of impressionism, futurism, or cubism in his work. The fashions have never interested him; but style—the best way of presenting a thought or theme—has no doubt been in his thought since boyhood. Perhaps it was his early acquaintance with the works of painters like Titian, Tintoretto, and Paolo Veronese that led him to base his own style in largeness, simplicity, and directness. He could not have built on a better founda-

tion. Whatever gimcrack or scrollwork bad taste may add at the top, there never yet has been any great art that did not have a plain and firm foundation at the bottom.

And in these days, when all painting seems going to the dogs with new and incomprehensible conventions put forth by first one group of painters and then another, it is a pleasure and a relief to know that there is a large body of the younger men who subscribe to Sargent's formulas and methods. So far as I know he has never done any teaching nor had any pupils, and yet the influence of his works has been great not only in England but in France and America. For many years his method of handling has been held up for admiration in the schools and every new work of his shown in an exhibition has had its chorus of students to pay it homage. They could not follow a better master.

Sargent, Alexander, Chase, with many other painters who came to the front with the founding of the Society of American Artists, have helped form the new American tradition of the craft. As I have indicated many times in the course of these pages, that tradition is not based in any mere theory or fancy of art but primarily in the calm, cold practice of good workmanship. In other words, the craftsman first; the great artist afterward—if such thing may be. There could be no wiser teaching, no more enduring



tradition. With it the painter can rise to what eerie heights he will; without it he forever moves on leaden wings.

It remains to be seen what the present generation will do in art. So many strange idols are set up in art places from day to day that one wonders if faith and purpose shall last. But whatever path the new group may follow or movement it may pursue, it cannot complain that its hands and eyes have not been trained; it cannot say that it inherited no artistic patrimony, was given no schooling, was taught no craftsmanship. The men of 1878 were perhaps handicapped by starting late and having to get their technical education in foreign lands, but the men of to-day have no such excuse. They can be technically well educated on their own native heath; they are practically not handicapped at all.

Will their success be the greater for that? Who can tell? There is always a tearing-down process going on in art almost exactly commensurate with the building-up process, and our country and its art may be on the threshold of such an epoch. Again, who knows? Many a generation has prepared and builded for its succeeding generation—prepared and builded apparently in vain. But whether the period is one of progress or recession it will not be the worse for the presence of competent builders. The

tradition of art is now deep-rooted. It will continue to grow and assert itself even though there be no historic sequence in its results. And so the thought is perhaps worth reiterating that the men of 1878 really have builded and prepared, with a will and in a way that will not soon be forgotten.





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